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**Living in a world with eyeballs: How women make meaning
of body image in the college environment**

by

Chrystal Ann Stanley

A dissertation submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Major: Education (Educational Leadership)

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Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2013

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DEDICATION

To John, Zach, and Morgan:
for your patience, faith, and love!

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ABSTRACT

Negative body image is pervasive among traditional, college-age women and takes a heavy toll on women's economic, personal, and political lives. Previous research has indicated that a large percentage of women hold negative views of their body. Women embarking on higher education are not exempt from these negative views. Conversely, college can pose challenges for women as they attempt to negotiate their academic, public, and personal identities.

While existing literature has provided insight regarding body-image issues among traditional-aged college women, little attention has been focused on the protective factors influencing body image. Addressing dissatisfaction with body image and identifying positive protective factors is especially salient for college personnel, given that women of college-age have been noted to be at high risk for social, physical, and mental health issues associated with body image.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how young women come to understand body image and make meaning of their own body image in the college environment. This study also examined the role of protective factors in the formation of young women's body image. Four themes emerged as influential in the participants' lives: relationships with female relatives and peers; media influence; participation in athletics; and relationships with people with disabilities. A new model was developed in this study to explain how young women may potentially come to understand their body image and make meaning of body image in the college environment.

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Background

Negative self-image takes a heavy toll on women's economic, personal, and political lives; therefore, body image is an important area for research (McKinley & Hyde, 1996). In her book, *The body project: An intimate history of American girls*, Brumberg (1997) posited that a girl's body is her "nemesis" (p. xxv). American girls and women are constantly confronted with traditional concepts of beauty and stereotypes regarding physical appearance (Miles, 2009). These stereotypes of beauty are perpetuated by media images and societal expectations.

The continual shifts in cultural norms have caused today's women to deal with many ambiguous and contradictory role expectations (Brumberg, 1997; Brylinsky, 1990). Women are assumed to have the desire to accommodate traditional feminine expectations, such as physical attractiveness and domesticity, as well as incorporate more modern standards of personal achievement and autonomy (Brylinsky). These changing expectations, and a shift in the 1960s to an emphasis on thinness for women, have caused increasing dissatisfaction for women regarding their bodies and self-image (Brylinsky). Many of these pressures are perpetuated by the media.

The standards of beauty and attractiveness set forth by the media may contribute to a woman's satisfaction or dissatisfaction with her body. Miles (2009) noted that "...viewing images of the thin-ideal caused an increase in body dissatisfaction, negative mood states, and eating disorder symptoms" (p. 5). Viewing these images also led to decreased self-esteem (Miles). According to Miles, women react to media imaging in one of two ways: they

attempt to achieve the ideal standard of beauty, or they see the ideal as unattainable and choose to abandon a healthy lifestyle completely.

Surveys of women conducted by Sanftner, Ryan, and Pierce (2009) indicated that more than half (56%) hold negative views of their body. Women embarking on higher education are not exempt from these negative views. Conversely, college can pose specific “...challenges not only to academic identity, but also to fundamental personal aspects of self” (Knightly & Whitelock, 2007). A woman’s experience in college is a paradox between intellectual pursuits and the pull to conform to society’s expectations (Miles, 2009). Because of this paradox, negative body image is common among traditional college-age women, yet not all women are impacted by these negative views. This dichotomy has led a limited number of researchers to investigate protective factors—such as feminist identity, resilience, and empowerment—to determine the association of these variables with body-image perception (Sanftner et al., 2009).

Statement of the Problem

Negative body image is pervasive among traditional, college-age women and takes a heavy toll on women’s economic, personal, and political lives (McKinley & Hyde, 1996). Women internalize cultural body standards and, as a result, learn to associate the body with self-love, health, and individual achievement (McKinley & Hyde, 1996; Peterson, Grippo, & Tantleff-Dunn, 2008). These women are at risk to develop eating disorders and other negative behaviors as they are faced with pressure to perform both socially and academically (Baugh, Mullis, Mullis, Hicks, & Peterson, 2010). While existing literature has provided insight into body image among traditional-aged college women, little attention has been

focused on the protective factors influencing body image. Addressing dissatisfaction with body image and identifying positive protective factors is especially salient for college personnel, given that women of college-age are perceived to be at high risk for social, physical and mental health issues associated with body image (McGrath, Wiggin & Caron, 2010).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how young women come to understand body image and make meaning of their own body image. This study also examined the role of protective factors in the formation of young women's body image.

Research Questions

The following research questions framed this study:

1. How do college women come to understand body image?
2. How do college women make meaning of their own body image in the college environment?

Significance of the Study

The results of this study are intended to add to the growing body of research in the areas of psychology, sociology, education, and women's studies regarding body image in traditional college-age women. The intent was to examine the relationship among body-image perception, protective factors, and the college experience. Understanding how college women come to understand body image and the influence of body-image perception is a worthy endeavor, especially when considering the impact of negative body image on a woman's physical, mental and emotional well-being.

The results of this study may potentially influence the practices of college offices dealing with young women who may have a dissatisfied body image. While a large amount of research has been conducted regarding body image, the majority has been quantitative. This has provided college administrators with valuable aggregate data regarding the impact of negative body image; however, answers to the “why” and “how” questions are uncertain. Therefore, administrators might be missing vital information that could assist with policy development and practice. This study attempted to give voice to the “why” and “how” surrounding body image. By using newly identified voices, it is hoped that new meaning could be given to old practices, and new practices and policies might be identified. The findings of this study may also spur additional qualitative research in the area of body image and its meaning for college women, especially as it relates to media influence. Additionally, the findings may lead to a study of the relationship between body image and participation in athletics as well as relationships with individuals with disabilities.

Theoretical Framework and Perspective

This interpretive phenomenological study incorporated a constructionist epistemology; the premise was that young women and girls construct their reality based upon their interactions with society (Crotty, 1998). Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) is well suited for researching issues surrounding body image as IPA particularly addresses how individuals make sense of their major life experiences (Smith, Flower, & Larkin, 2009). By employing IPA methods as the researcher, I interpreted what participants told me about their lived experiences as they attempted to make sense of them.

A feminist theoretical perspective was used to guide the research and analyze data. I selected this prospective to understand how young women interpret the meaning of the world around them and determine a sense of self and body image, specifically through their interactions with others. Feminist social science identifies five common concepts (Bloom, 1998). The first concept is the social construction of gender, realizing that narratives are constructed by the individual and are also socially constructed. Second, feminist theory can be used to explore the tensions and contradictions of women's diverse lives and their personal narratives including methods for interpreting and deconstructing narrative data. Third, the importance of the context of the research question can be demonstrated through reports of conflict that provide interesting insights for locating subjectivity and understanding how it is fragmented. Next, carefully and thoughtfully crafted prose exposing the critical self-reflection of the researcher is shared while exposing how the researcher's biography influences interpretation. Finally, the researcher-participant relationship is paramount to convey the realities of feminist research (Bloom, 1998).

Feminist theory provided a lens through which to situate this study. However, as data were analyzed, additional theories were explored to understand the findings.

Research Design

This qualitative, interpretive phenomenological study with a constructionist epistemology used semi-structured in-depth interviews. Three interviews were scheduled with specific, guiding questions and topics for which participants were encouraged to elaborate. The first interview focused on life history, the second on details of the experience,

and the final on reflection on meaning (Seidman, 2006). This enabled each participant's perspective on body image to be articulated and uncovered as the individual experienced it.

Data analysis was conducted using a multi-phased approach (Creswell, 2002; Esterberg, 2002; Merriam, 2002). First, I began content analysis by organizing and preparing my data (Creswell, 2009). Transcriptions of interviews were divided into meaning units to make analysis and theme-development easier (Merriam, 2002). Open coding was used, conducting a line-by-line analysis of the interview transcripts and observation notes (Esterberg, 2002).

Similarities and patterns were analyzed, keeping in mind the study's epistemology and theoretical and philosophical underpinnings. From these patterns, themes were identified (Esterberg, 2002). Themes, patterns, and similarities were shared with participants for member-checking, debriefing and feedback in order to ensure the goodness of my research (Creswell, 2009). Transcripts and field notes were reviewed to complete focused coding (Esterberg, 2002). The focused coding primarily honed relevant phenomena, examples of each phenomenon, and commonalities among the different data sources (Creswell, 2009).

Definition of Terms

The following terms were defined for use in this research:

Abstraction: "Abstraction is a basic form of identifying patterns between emergent themes and developing a sense of what can be called a 'super-ordinate' theme. It involves putting like with like and developing a new name for the cluster (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, pp. 96-97).

Body Image: First defined as the picture of our body that we form in our minds (Brylinsky, 1990). This definition was later refined to include the degree to which we are satisfied with that picture. Priya, Prasanna, Sucharitha, and Vaz (2010) defined body image as “the mental picture we have of our body’s measures, contours and shape; and our feelings related to these characteristics and to our body parts” (p. 316). It is this later definition that is used in this study.

Self-Image: Has been defined by psychologist in several ways. The most common definition states that self-image is the “...total subjective perception of oneself, including an image of one’s body and impressions of one’s personality, capabilities, and so on” (Coon, 1994, 471). Self-image is often closely tied to self-concept which has been defined as “ones self-identity, a schema, consisting of an organized collection of beliefs and feelings about oneself” (Baron & Byrne, 1997, 152) and as “a cognitive appraisal of our physical, social, and academic competence” (Eggen & Kauchak, 1999, 79). While these terms are often used interchangeably, for the purpose of this study, self-image will be defined using the definition from Coon (1994).

Subsumption: “...is similar to abstraction but it operates where an emergent theme itself acquires a super-ordinate status as it helps bring together a series of related themes” (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, pp. 96-97).

Summary

This study explored the experiences of college women with body image and how they make meaning of their own body image. The findings of the study may help inform administrators and policy makers in institutions of higher education regarding the impact of

negative body image on young women and will, hopefully, influence the practice of college offices dealing with young women who may have dissatisfied body image.

Chapter 2 contains a literature review, which provides the definition of body image and outlines the way in which women construct body image. It presents and discusses literature regarding potential protective factors, the correlation of body image with decision making, and potential intervention strategies. The chapter is concluded with literature that introduces, outlines, and defines feminist theory of the body.

Chapter 3, presents the methodology of the study, and includes the characteristics of qualitative research, implementation of interpretive phenomenological analysis, and feminist theoretical underpinnings. The research design, trustworthiness, and the role and positionality of researcher are discussed in detail. The chapter concludes with a discussion of ethical issues, delimitations, and potential limitations of the study.

Chapter 4 includes participant profiles, their views regarding body image, and a detailed discussion of findings. Findings are organized around major themes identified during the study. Major themes include relationships with female relatives, media influence, relationships with individuals with disabilities, and the impact of participation in athletics on body image. These themes emerged from interviews conducted with each participant as well as a review of archival and survey data.

The final chapter focuses on a discussion of research findings and the implications of those findings. The chapter includes: (a) a brief summary of my research and methodological approach; (b) a review of discoveries that led to changes or clarifications in my research approach; (c) a discussion of research findings and how those findings aided in answering my original research questions; (d) a presentation of implications for policy and

practice within higher education and student affairs; (e) an overview of how this research study contributes to existing literature and implications for further research; and (f) my personal reflections on the research process and experience and its implications on my future research.

CHAPTER 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Body image was first defined as the picture of our body that we form in our minds (Brylinsky, 1990). This definition was later refined to include the degree to which we are satisfied with that picture. Priya, Prasanna, Sucharitha, and Vaz (2010) defined body image as “the mental picture we have of our body’s measures, contours and shape; and our feelings related to these characteristics and to our body parts” (p. 316). Fallon (1990) enhanced the definition of body image by including the way individuals believe others see them. The issue of dissatisfaction with one’s body image has been well documented. This dissatisfaction has been defined as a discrepancy between reality and the ideal (Ogden, 2004). Considering the idea of discrepancy, Ogden posited that body dissatisfaction can be assessed in three ways: (1) perceiving the body as larger than it is; (2) discrepancies between how individuals want to look and how they perceive themselves; and (3) negative feelings about one’s body. Others have proposed that negative body image is equally influenced by the way individuals believe others see them (Fallon, 1990).

The literature has revealed that, in the United States, both men and women have a distorted perception of body image. Despite the fact that both sexes have distorted views of their body, men and women appear to attach different meanings to their bodies. Brylinsky (1990) suggested that men view their bodies primarily as functional tools that need to be in shape and ready to use. On the other hand, women see their bodies as “commodities, their physical appearance serving as an interpersonal currency” (p. 17). Feminist theorists have indicated that a woman’s body is constructed to be looked upon as an object; because of this,

women learn to view their bodies as outside observers (McKinley & Hyde, 1996). “They internalize cultural body standards so that the standards appear to originate from the self and believe that achieving these standards is possible, even in the face of considerable evidence to the contrary” (pp. 182-183). Due to this inventory-type view of their bodies as a commodity, women are at a greater risk to develop negative body image, tying their self-worth to their physical appearance (Peterson, Grippo, & Tantleff-Dunn, 2008).

Self-objectification is also tied to depressed mood, decreased self-esteem, and even disruption in performance due to the disruption of focused attention (Peterson et al., 2008). Some believe that college-age women are especially vulnerable because of the transitions and changes that are occurring in their lives (Miles, 2009). Others have suggested that young women entering college are impacted by social norms associated with appearance that have been engrained through idealized images of attractiveness long before they enter college (McGrath, Wiggin, & Caron, 2010). Addressing dissatisfaction with body image and identifying positive and protective factors is especially salient for college personnel, given that women of college age are documented to be at high risk for social, physical and mental health issues associated with body image (McGrath et al.). The remainder of this literature review addresses body-image issues in college-age women and the implications of their actions based upon those issues.

Constructing Image

“Women learn to associate body surveillance with self-love, health, and individual achievement” (McKinley & Hyde, 1996, p 183). Surveys of college-age women indicate that more than half report having a negative body image (Sanftner, Ryan, & Pierce, 2009). These

women are at risk to develop eating disorders and other negative behaviors as they are faced with pressure to perform both socially and academically (Baugh, Mullis, Mullis, Hicks, & Peterson, 2010). At times, women feel a loss of control when they are faced with exceptional pressure to perform. This can lead to an attempt to gain control through restrictive behaviors with their bodies (Priya et al., 2010). This response to pressure, along with the view of their bodies as a commodity, leads women to be more likely to perceive themselves as being more overweight than they actually are (Baugh et al., 2010). In fact, Brylinsky (1990) posited that, “50 percent to 70 percent of college female students misperceive their weight-related appearance, consistently overestimating their body size eighteen percent more often than men” (p. 2). Additionally, Gillen, and Lefkowitz (2011) noted that the best predictor of body image and self-esteem is the discrepancy between perceptions of an individual’s own body size and the body size individuals believe the other sex sees as ideal. This construct is important for college students, as they spend extensive time with peers in academic, social, living, and working environments. When women perceive their actual size does not compare positively with the ideal size constructed by others, their body image and self-esteem suffer (Gillen & Lefkowitz, 2011). Shame is a common emotion experienced by women with a negative body image. This shame, as experienced by young women, is tied, not only to negative feelings about their body, but also negative feelings about themselves (McKinley & Hyde, 1996).

Although researchers have agreed that body image is an issue among college-age women, this distortion appears to be culturally enhanced. Most at risk are middle to upper class, white, college-educated women in westernized countries (Brylinsky, 1990). While white women are most at risk, one should not assume that all women of color are safe from

the negative effects of body image distortion. Women of color who are socialized and pressured to adhere to the Western ideal of beauty and dress are also negatively influenced (Baugh, et al., 2010; Hesse-Biber, Livingstone, Ramirez, Barko, & Johnson, 2010). The implications of cultural influence extend well beyond race and ethnicity. The continual shifts in cultural norms have caused today's women to deal with many ambiguous and contradictory role expectations (Brumberg, 1997; Brylinsky, 1990). Women are assumed to have the desire to accommodate traditional feminine expectations, such as physical attractiveness and domesticity, as well as to incorporate more modern standards of personal achievement and autonomy (Brylinsky). These changing expectations, and a shift in the 1960's to an emphasis on thinness for women, has caused increasing dissatisfaction for women with their bodies and self-image (Brylinsky). Dissatisfaction with body image may not be due to a misperception of a woman's own body size, but instead a focus on an unrealistic ideal size (Gillen & Lefkowitz, 2011). Many of these pressures are perpetuated by the media. In a study by Swami and Smith (2012), women who were exposed to media images of the thin ideal experienced more negative body image as compared to control groups. Although minimal in number, a few studies have concluded that exposure to media body ideals have a null effect (Ferguson, Munoz, Contreras, & Velasquez, 2011; Martin & Kennedy, 1993; Thornton & Maurice, 1997) or even decrease body-image dissatisfaction (Cusumano & Thompson, 1997; Durkin & Paxton, 2002). However, the majority of research supports the claim that media images of the female ideal negatively impact body image (Swami & Smith, 2012).

American women are constantly confronted with traditional concepts of beauty and stereotypes regarding physical appearance (Miles, 2009). These stereotypes of beauty are

perpetuated by media images and societal expectations. After the turn of the twentieth century, “because of the introduction of many new kinds of cultural mirrors, in motion pictures and popular photography, in mass-market advertising in the women’s magazines, as well as on department store counters and in dressing rooms most women and girls began to subject their face and figure to more consistent scrutiny” (Brumberg, 1997, p. 70). Most media sources portray women in stereotypical ways. “The images have consistently been the same old clichés’ the housewives and the glamour girls. Women have constantly been ghettoized into a very limited number of roles” (Quindlen, 1978, p. 41); and these roles have been commodified and exploited for corporate gain (McLaren & Farhmandpur, 2005).

Media sources influence much of life in America, including the image we have of ourselves as individuals and as a society. During the post-war 1950s, advertising became more prevalent with the mass production of the television. Advertising in the early 1950s mirrored not necessarily what the population was experiencing but the lifestyle that was deemed best - family values in suburbia (Centanni, 2011). Centanni posited that advertising was used to create an image of the “safe haven of suburbia amidst social turmoil” (p. 1). Americans flocked to the suburbs to pursue this idealized life that overemphasized the necessity of traditional family values and pointed to progressive jobs for women outside the home as a destabilizing force (Centanni). Women, who did not fit with the stereotype, struggled with their identity. Advertisers capitalized on this struggle by suggesting that the purchase of particular items would strengthen the family. Through advertising, companies knew they could not only sell products but could also shape the consumer’s image of who she is and who she should become (Centanni). Companies reinforced the notion that success as a mother could be purchased. Women faced the impossible task of adhering to all

previous expectations of women, while simultaneously satisfying new images of womanhood (Katzman & Lee, 1997). The idea that women can be moral, “good,” and pretty by simply being clean and purchasing the correct items has created a multi-billion dollar advertising industry focused on women, their lifestyle, and their appearance. This focus on appearance plays a role in the frequently distorted view women have of their bodies.

Knowing that women often tie their self-worth to their physical appearance, advertising campaigns began capitalizing physical appearance. The female ideal changes frequently; and the woman’s body has become a marketing tool for products aimed at both men and women. When young girls do not see themselves portrayed in these idealized images, they often engage in body projects to make themselves appear closer to the ideal image (Brumberg, 1997). Even those television shows that profess to challenge traditional concepts of beauty can have negative effects:

Programs such as *How to Look Good Naked* do not challenge the idea that appearance matters and may in fact do more harm by highlighting the importance of women’s participation in the ‘body project’; that is, the idea that women’s appearance is of paramount importance and that women should constantly work on their bodies. (Swami & Smith, 2012, p. 163)

The body is a consuming project for American girls because it provides an important venue for announcing who they are to the world. Much of a girl’s image comes from her clothing, skin, and size (Brumberg, 1997). In *Teaching against global capitalism and the new imperialism: A critical pedagogy*, McLaren and Farhmandpur (2005) discussed the hypnotic draw of this capitalistic view, “Hypnotized by the silken seductiveness of lingerie capitalism – superexploitation trussed in attire from Frederick’s of Hollywood—we are beckoned into a patriarchal mansion of consumer pleasures where fulfillment is untiringly supplanted by the promise of something better” (p. 193). In many American schools, image

determines who a young girl is; it predicts her social status and thus her social capital. In this way, girls and their parents or guardians are seduced into consumer capitalistic buying frenzies. “Children spend \$35 billion of their own money annually while influencing their parents to spend another \$300 billion” (p. 203).

Young women today have been inundated their entire lives with advertising for wonder diets and miracle-producing workout equipment (Brumberg, 1997). Is it any wonder they struggle with negative body image? These negative self-doubts have led to a multi-billion dollar diet and weight loss industry. The message received by women is that to be successful and happy they need only purchase a way to be thin (Brumberg).

When women do not neatly fit into the expected stereotypical roles, a crisis of nonunitary subjectivity and fragmentation occurs, often leading to unhealthy body image. The standards of beauty and attractiveness set forth by the media may contribute to a woman’s satisfaction or dissatisfaction with her body. Miles (2009) posited “viewing images of the thin-ideal caused an increase in body dissatisfaction, negative mood states, and eating disorder symptoms” (p. 5). Viewing these images also led to decreased self-esteem (Miles, 2009). Steinfeldt, Carter, Zakrajsek, and Steinfeldt (2011) agreed, stating that the results of their study of 143 women at a small private college in the Midwest suggested that “the more a woman desires to be thin, the lower levels of body esteem she reports” (p. 412). According to Miles (2009), women react to media imaging in one of two ways. They attempt to achieve the ideal standard of beauty or they see the ideal as unattainable and choose to abandon a healthy lifestyle completely.

Protective Factors

Key reoccurring themes in research of positive body image are: high self-esteem, low appearance comparison, low internalization of media body ideals, and social identity (Grogan, 2010). While these themes appear to be closely related to body-image satisfaction, the causal direction of the relationships is a matter of debate. Researchers question if the themes lead to a more positive body image; or, conversely, if satisfaction with one's body image positively influences an individual's self-esteem, appearance comparison, internalization of body ideals, and social identity (Paxton, Neumark-Sztainer, Hannon, & Eisenberg 2006; Tiggemann, 2005). Much research attention has been focused on cultural standards and media influence when it comes to body image. Relatively less attention has been given to exploring the relationships that women have with the important others in their lives and the potential association between relationship variables and body-image perception (Sanftner et al., 2009).

According to Koro-Ljungberg and Hayes (2006), women in relationships construct roles and identities based upon their interactions with others. Knightly and Whitelock (2007) proposed that people draw upon two sources to determine their value: (a) individuals make cognitive comparisons between what they actually achieve and what they would like to achieve; and (b) "judgments of worth derive from social interactions and the feedback received from significant others" (p. 18). Accordingly, self-esteem and body image are both individually and socially constructed. McGrath, Wiggin, and Caron (2010) agreed that having a positive role model can lead to improved body image. Studies investigating the role of feminism, resilience, and body-image dissatisfaction have found that young women who are exposed to feminist ideals through family members or peers early in development have

lower levels of body-image dissatisfaction (McGrath et al., 2010; Rubin, Nemeroff, & Russo, 2004). Additionally, peers play a large role in the social construction of self-esteem and body image. Numerous studies have linked dissatisfaction with body image to body-related teasing and criticism from peers and family members (Sanftner et al., 2009). An individual's cultural milieu and affiliations impact how they view themselves, their body image, and those around them (Koro-Ljungberg & Hayes, 2006). Findings suggest that close friends and the encounters we have with them may have both positive and negative influence on our body image, self-image, and the resulting behaviors we exhibit (Harring, Montgomery, & Hardin, 2010).

According to the literature, friends have an impact on self-image and decision-making and young women are most affected by this reality. College-age women report the greatest amount of connection with friends (Sanftner et al., 2009). This connection is of greater influence than any other. The influence of peers is cause for concern to those working closely with adolescent girls. There is evidence that the pressure for peer conformity in adolescent girls may make them more self-conscious and cause them to create and reinterpret theories about themselves (Brylinsky, 1990).

The serious consequences of negative body image have led researchers to investigate protective factors. Feminist identity, resilience, and empowerment have all been researched to determine their impact on body image. Support exists for the idea that women who subscribe to feminist attitudes are less apt to evaluate themselves on physical appearance (Peterson, Grippo, & Tantleff-Dunn, 2008). A study by Peterson, Tantleff, and Bedwell (2006) researching the effects of exposure to feminist theories of body image, demonstrated

that a strong identification with feminist ideals was associated with positive changes in body-image satisfaction.

The link between positive body image and feminist identity is not supported by all researchers. A study by Cash, Ancis, and Strachan (1997) revealed that feminist identity was not significantly related to less attention to physical appearance or a more positive body image. Despite the fact that feminism did promote an intellectual understanding of, and modification of belief, in some studies, this did not translate into improved body image or a changed view by women of their beauty and appearance (Rubin et al., 2004). Studies of the protective factors of feminist identity have focused on behaviors associated with the women's movement. Some researchers believe the broader construct of empowerment may be a more effective protective factor.

Research involving the impact of empowerment on body image typically centers around intervention programs that focuses on media literacy, advocacy skills, stress management, self-image, and body image (McVey, Lieberman, Voorberg, Wardrope, & Blackmore, 2003; Piran, Levine, & Irving, 2000; Seaver, McVey, Fullerton, & Stratton, 1997;). Peterson, Grippo, and Tantleff-Dunn (2008) examined the relationship between empowerment, feminism, body image, and eating disturbances. This group studied 276 undergraduate women at a large southeastern university in the United States. Results indicated that empowerment was significantly related to body image. In fact, the findings revealed a stronger, significant correlation between empowerment and body image than between feminist identity and body image. In addition to studies of the correlation between body image and feminist identity or empowerment, limited research is available that investigates the correlation of body-image dissatisfaction and the notion of resilience.

One of the first studies to relate body-image dissatisfaction and the idea of resilience was conducted by Rubin et al. (2004). The researchers examined college-age women using focus groups and found that lower levels of dissatisfaction with body image were associated with resilience. McGrath et al. (2010) hypothesized that resiliency may have a “measurable mitigating effect on body-image dissatisfaction in young women” specifically “that as a young woman’s resilience increases, her body-image dissatisfaction will decrease” (p. 19). A study by Rubin, Nemeroff, and Russo (2010) revealed there is a significant negative correlation between resiliency and body image, and a significant protective relationship exists between a woman’s resilience and possessing a negative body image. Although research has suggested significant protective factors relating to body image, dissatisfaction with body image continues to be a pervasive concern in American society.

Correlation with Academic Success and Decision Making

Cultural standards of beauty and femininity, especially the dominant images of the thin ideal, have been found to impact female college students’ attitudes and body image, and influences their behaviors related to disordered eating and decision making (Steinfeldt, Carter, Zakrajsek, & Steinfeldt, 2011).

Responding to the research attention given to understanding body image, Miles (2009) conducted a study to determine if a correlation exists between body image and academic achievement. Miles argued that understanding this correlation could help educators create an environment that is more conducive to female student success. Miles found an inverse relationship between academic performance and body image. This suggests that a healthier body image is linked positively to a higher grade point average. Lounsbury,

Huffstetler, Leong, and Gibson (2005) agreed, stating that a coherent and secure sense of identity is positively linked to grade point average. Harring et al. (2010) determined that higher levels of body dissatisfaction interfered with academic performance. The results of their study indicated that women with inflated body-weight perceptions were more likely to report that their academic achievement was impacted by stress. Stress has a negative effect on achievement, retention and completion rates for students experiencing its affects.

The traditional marker of accomplishment in higher education has been the acquisition of a degree (Knightley & Whitelock, 2007). Some researchers question whether the academic stress associated with poor body image might impact completion of a course of study. A study by Glass, Haas, and Reither (2010) found that heavy women completed less post-secondary education than their thinner peers, which hindered their occupational standing throughout their careers. The researchers determined that heavy women may face greater social stigma from peers and as a result feel marginalized from higher educational institutions (Glass et al.). Knightly and Whitelock (2007) determined that negative self-image can be used to predict a lack of motivation which affects the likelihood of withdrawal from a course of study in higher education therefore impacting educational and vocational choice. Women who choose to pursue a full-time professional career had an average image fixation score that was much lower than those choosing part-time employment or no employment (Miles, 2009). According to Miles, “this may indicate that undergraduate college women who plan on pursuing professional careers have a healthy body image and may not be concerned about how their physical appearances are viewed by others” (p. 8).

Based on the literature, it becomes clear that body image and self-image impact college-age women, and that their body images are influenced by both the media and their

interactions with others. While limited research has been conducted to investigate the effect of body image on educational success and vocational choice, further research is needed to explore these areas more thoroughly.

Given the influence of dissatisfied body image on college-age women, institutions of higher education are beginning to investigate intervention strategies. Although findings in the literature concur that body-image dissatisfaction, which is prevalent among women, must be addressed, there is far less agreement regarding the effectiveness of intervention strategies. Researchers have studied an array of interventions resulting in mixed findings. One such study conducted by Richardson and Paxton (2009), emphasized that program content and methodology are not the only important intervention components; setting, participants and style, and mode of presentation also need to be considered. The most common and highly recommended body image intervention strategy discussed in literature is group therapy (Duba, Kindsvatter, & Priddy, 2010; Steese, Dollette, Phillips, Hossfeld, Matthews, & Taormina, 2006; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005).

Group therapy refers to any type of therapy or support that involves treating more than one client in a group setting (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Groups focused on treating women with dissatisfied body image tend to integrate relational theory, resiliency practices, social support, and skills training in order to enhance positive connections with self and others, collective strength, and competence (Steese et al., 2006). The use of gender specific groups also increases perceived social support, self-efficacy, and body image improvement (Steese, et. al, 2006). Duba et al. (2010), proposed the use of narrative therapy groups for women dissatisfied with their body image.

Based on the ideas of Michel Foucault (as cited by Duba et al., 2010), narrative therapy, provides a useful tool to help counselors conceptualize methods to assist women with unnatural expectations about their body. Foucault believed that certain values, ideas and traditions, which are constructed by individuals, achieve a status of truth as they are used persistently (Duba et al.). These “truths” then contribute to the realities perceived by individuals of how they and others should look, live and be (Duba et al.). Narrative therapy strives to reconstruct these “truths” by unpacking values, assumptions and ideals from which body image problems arise (Duba et al.). According to Duba et al. (2010), “a narrative group approach to addressing the problem of unnatural expectations for body image is advantageous in that it facilitates the formation of a united community...that can identify and question the subtle but influential values and ideals that exist within the dominant culture that support this problem” (p. 115).

Choate (2005) recommended a model for treating body-image issues that focuses on enhancing protective factors as a means for prevention and intervention. Choate’s study identified a model that suggested the use of the following: family of origin support; gender role satisfaction; positive physical self-concept; effective coping strategies; and a sense of holistic balance and wellness. When using this model, women are encouraged to focus less on weight, shape and physical appearance, and are encouraged to refocus on spirituality, self-direction, work and leisure, friendship, and love as a means for finding purpose in life (Choate).

Regardless of the intervention strategy being used, face-to-face interventions for body-image issues and eating disorders are rapidly becoming augmented with computer-based programs for intervention. The millennial generation is increasingly more comfortable

interacting over the internet, and this method of intervention can potentially reach large numbers of individuals (Paxton, McLean, Gollings, Faulkner, & Wertheim, 2007). In addition, “as psychological problems are frequently associated with shame, the ability to access an intervention in privacy, and a high degree of anonymity may...be an advantage” (Paxton et al., p. 692). Although there are advantages to internet-based interventions, limitations to internet-delivered interventions have also been discussed. From a practical standpoint, students and professionals may lack computer skills and technical support (Paxton et al.). There are also limitations related to the intervention itself including difficulty in communication and a lack of auditory and nonverbal cues, which may increase miscommunication; and an artificial environment that may inhibit group cohesion and outcomes (Paxton et al.). Despite these concerns, researchers have found that computer and internet-based interventions show great promise for working with women who have body-image issues.

In a recent study, a majority of study participants who completed a computer-aided, dissonance-based eating disorder prevention program “reported feeling that completing the online program helped them meet most of their goals regarding body acceptance” (Stice, Rohde, Durant, & Shaw, 2012, p. 8). A comparison of face-to-face and internet-based interventions revealed that “although greater change was observed in the face-to-face than internet group at posttest, the improvements in the internet group at the 6-month follow-up indicates that, in the longer term, the effects of the program were equivalent in both delivery modes for most variables” (Paxton et al., 2007, 702).

Despite disparate findings in studies of body image intervention strategies for young women, researchers agree that any type of intervention is better than no intervention.

Additionally, computer-based studies, (Paxton, et al, 2007; Stice et al., 2012) have indicated strong support for the use of face-to-face body image interventions when possible, as well as on-line synchronous internet or computer interventions when face-to-face interventions are not possible. This researcher concurs that “research into body image improvement programs is in its infancy and more research is needed that targets aspects that are important in the development and maintenance of body-image dissatisfaction such as negative affect and dieting behaviors” (Devaraj & Lewis, 2010, p. 105).

Feminist Theory of the Body

It is impossible to talk about feminist theory without talking about the body. The body has been a thoroughly discussed and controversial theme for feminist theorists. The contrast between mind and body has been correlated with gender differences—females being tied to their body and males to their ability to rationalize (Grosz, 1994). Challenging these assumptions has led to the development of feminist theory of the body.

Early feminists were suspicious of their bodies (Bordo, 1993). Women during that time, and often today, viewed their bodies as commodities that enabled them to entice men into marriage, thereby providing the woman with a means to live. Feminist theorists indicated that a woman’s body is constructed to be looked at – as an object; because of this, women have learned to view their bodies as outside observers (McKinley & Hyde, 1996). Therefore, women began providing their bodies as objects for the appraisal of others. These body projects often lead to the notion of fragmentation and multiplicity, which can be both helpful and harmful to the woman as an individual (Ong, 2005). Women become alienated from their true feelings as they become objects of male desire (Ellis, 1990). Although early

feminist writers addressed issues of the body, it was the publication of *The second sex* (Simone De Beauvoir, 1953) that brought to public attention the feminist idea of the relationship between the body and self.

De Beauvoir (1953) recognized that the body exists both as a physical presence in the world and as a presence that interprets the world through a unique point of view. She proposed that this point of view is lived differently for men and women. De Beauvoir is credited with originating the distinction between sex and gender, with sex seen as a fixed biology and gender as the social meaning created and assigned to that biology. This distinction is noted in her famous claim: “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (p. 295). Feminist body theorists believe it is impossible to distinguish the biological body from the body as it is experienced. The act of becoming a woman begins early in a woman’s life and influences a woman’s lived experience in meaningful ways.

Young girls’ lived experience of their bodies differs greatly from that of a young boy. While boys are encouraged to engage physically, girls are urged to be more passive and treat their bodies as passive objects (Brumberg, 1997). Thus, girls learn early in life that their body is an object for another’s gaze. The media perpetuates this objectification with the display of women’s bodies for the purpose of selling product (Ellis, 1990). As girls enter puberty, their bodies become a source of power and shame (De Beauvoir, 1953). This sense of shame is exacerbated by the way in which society reacts to a girl’s pubescent state, often with an undercurrent of secrecy. Girls are instructed in the hygiene associated with their menstruation, but are not guided through the bodily changes, social expectations, and personal realizations that accompany puberty (Brumberg, 1997).

Sexual difference

Sexual-difference theorists differ from De Beauvoir in their writings regarding the body. The difference is related to the goals of the writers. Sexual difference theorists seek to understand the masculine along with the feminine in order to examine strengths in the differences (Braidotti, 1994). The female body and its capacity to give birth is celebrated for its power (Brumberg, 1997; Lorde, 1984). Although this approach gives women's bodies' positive value, it also produces the possibility of homogenizing the experiences of women. Susan Bordo (1993) suggested that each woman's experience is unique and should not be viewed as a statement of truth for all women.

Irigaray (1993) argued that many scholarly writers fail to make women's thinking visible. Irigaray critiqued scholarly works for their focus on the masculine, arguing that sexual difference is not recognized. Whitford (1991) argued that scholars must include how women interact with the world and experience their bodies in the world. Without considering how women interact with the world, male bodies are identified with power and authority, while female bodies are portrayed as defective male bodies, embodying weakness or deficiency (Whitford, 1991). Feminist body theory attempts to construct a viable and positive alternative to the defective view. The fundamental nature of sexual difference theory is tied to the bodily processes of reproduction (Grosz, 1994). The problem with this view is that sexual difference does not produce sexual identity or validate the ways in which women experience their bodies.

Sexual difference is a point of contention between sexual difference theorists and the post-structuralist theorists influenced by Foucault (1979). Like Foucault, Butler (2004) viewed our female gender identity as a social construction unrelated to sex. For Haraway

(1991), even the binary classification of sex as male or female is driven by cultural norms. Haraway suggested the idea of the cyborg, a creature that is simultaneously biological and mechanical, in order to overcome the distinction between nature and culture. Butler (1990) argued that sexual difference theorists fail to acknowledge cultural influences on gender. She believed a woman's view of her body is inexplicably tied to her sense of value and place within society. This "value and place" is often defined by mass-media's portrayal of women (Miles, 2009). Therefore, it is crucial to consider feminist theory when attempting to understand body image and the impact of the body projects women perform. Women experience their bodies in unique ways and are often bound by non-unitary subjectivity (Bloom, 1998). They are also subject to the reality of living in a capitalistic society that markets womanhood in ways that impact women's interpretations of their own bodies (McLaren & Farhmandpur, 2005).

Body consciousness and regulation

In the 1970s, feminist writers began to draw attention to the ways in which women regulate their own bodies in response to societal norms (Bordo, 1993). Feminists took notice of women's increasing drive to participate in regimes of dieting, makeup, hair straightening or curling, dress, exercise, and cosmetic surgery. "In our culture not one part of a women's body is left untouched, unaltered" (Dworkin, 1974, p. 113). Foucault (1979) completed extensive research regarding practices specifically tied to regulating the female body. When women do not see themselves portrayed in idealized images, they often engage in body projects to make themselves appear closer to the ideal image (Brumberg, 1997). Women

actively modify and discipline their own bodies to avoid social punishment or to derive pleasure.

These body projects are accomplished through fragmentation, in which the woman temporarily splits herself into her female-self and social-self in order to minimize the differences between herself and the others in the community, or by using multiplicity, wherein the woman resists fragmentation in favor of embodying her ethnic, racial or gender identity to an extreme for a staged performance of personal identity (Ong, 2005). While both approaches can be harmful, research has indicated that multiplicity has fewer complications (Ong, 2005). Both men and women engage in body projects; however, it is primarily a female phenomenon.

Theorists ascribing to the feminist theory of objectified body consciousness agree that women experience their bodies differently than men. Women have higher levels of body shame and body surveillance than men (Rees, 2007). Objectified body consciousness theory examines the phenomenon that leads to women viewing their bodies as observable objects (McKinley, 2002). According to McKinley, in Western culture, men are commonly associated with the mind and women with the body. McKinley (2002) argued that cultures that allow this separation of mind and body can lead to the construction of women as observable objects. Women come to view their bodies as objects through three mechanisms: (1) body surveillance; (2) internalizing cultural body standards which leads to body shame; and (3) appearance control beliefs (McKinley, 2002). Body surveillance is defined as viewing one's own body as an outside observer (Spitzack, 1990). Through a constant barrage of media, girls learn quickly that their bodies are continually appraised by others and come to experience their bodies in terms of how they appear to others (Brumberg, 1997;

Spitzack, 1990). Western culture idealizes thin in women. If women do not conform to this idealized cultural expectation for their bodies, they are at risk of developing body shame (Brumberg, 1997; McKinley, 1999). In response, women attempt to conform, believing that cultural body standards can be achieved if they give enough effort (McKinley, 2002).

Butler (2004) believed these body projects are an attempt to respond to the social scripts. These scripted performances reflect how we feel about ourselves and how we feel about how others react in relation to us (Bloom, 1998). Young (2005) suggested that most women experience their bodies as objects to be observed or controlled. “She often lives her body as a burden, which must be dragged and prodded along, and at the same time protected” (p. 36). In her book, *The body project: An intimate history of American girls*, Brumberg (1997) stated that a girl’s body is her “nemesis” (p. xxv).

Alcoff (2005) believed we learn to feel differently about our bodies as they develop. A woman’s sense of her own body is informed by the way it is perceived by others; for Merleau-Ponty (1962), body image is the awareness we have of the shape of our body. Brylinsky (1990) agreed, defining body image as the picture of our body we form in our minds. The trouble with this view of body image is that it suggests an internal representation of the body that is completely separate from the actual body. Weiss (1999) suggested that it is more accurate to think of body image as a way of experiencing the body and its interaction with the world.

Feminist theorists of the body have contributed to the philosophy of embodiment and ensured that attention is given to the idea of the body in social and political thought. Feminist theory of the body provides a general account of the relationship between our

bodies and ourselves. The resulting subjectivity has led to a way of understanding biological and social embodiment that is valuable to other marginalized groups.

Summary

Body-image dissatisfaction has become more prevalent on college campus, especially among women, and has been associated with depression, anxiety, and lowered self-esteem. With this focus on physical attractiveness, up to ninety percent of college student are concerned with body image (Lowery, Kurpius, Befort, & Banks, 2005). Body-image dissatisfaction's effect on self-esteem has been well established, and mediating factors exist to protect young women from dissatisfaction with their body and self-image. Such factors include feminist ideals, empowerment, and resilience. While these factors have been investigated, a gap in the research still exists regarding the best approach for ensuring the exposure of young women to these factors.

Researchers studying body image tend to focus on the impact or correlation of body image and eating disturbances or health-related behaviors. While studies tend to agree there is a negative impact from dissatisfaction with body image, few researchers investigate further than to determine the negative effect on self-image. There appears to be a strong need for additional research to determine the detrimental consequences of a negative self-image.

A substantial body of literature exists that focuses on the relationship between female college students' body image and protective factors; however, little attention has been given to the impact of body image on educational success and vocational choice. Additional research and further discussions are warranted. When conducting the current research study,

it was important to consider the individual's cultural background, family and peer relationships, and media exposure.

Additionally, while extensive research exists focusing on the issue of body image and culture, few studies have approached the issue using qualitative methods. What remains unanswered is why white women appear to be most at risk of developing negative body image and the detrimental consequences that follow. The use of qualitative methodology may help answer this question.

CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The literature review presented in Chapter 2 discussed the issues surrounding body image for women and identified the dearth of existing qualitative research addressing how women make meaning of body image in the college environment. Although it is generally known quantitatively that body-image dissatisfaction is an issue for women, there is a lack of understanding regarding “how” and “why” body image influences individual women. This study explored body image within a small, homogenous sample in order to better understand how women make meaning of their body image.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how young women come to understand body image and make meaning of their own body image in the college environment. This study also examined the role of protective factors in the formation of young women’s body image.

Research Questions

The following research questions framed this study:

1. How do college women come to understand body image?
2. How do college women make meaning of their own body image in the college environment?

Characteristics of Qualitative Research

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore and understand the meanings individuals make of events or phenomena in their lives (Creswell, 2009). One distinguishing characteristics of qualitative research is the importance of recognizing the

researcher as the primary instrument (Merriam, 2002). The study of a young woman's understanding of her own body image aligns well with this approach, enabling the researcher to focus on relationships rather than instruments or questionnaires that are developed by other researchers. Qualitative researchers also conduct their research in the participant's natural setting, collecting data at the site where the phenomenon is experienced (Creswell, 2009).

Qualitative design requires that the researcher incorporates the participants as a vital component of the research team, through member checking—a process of collaboration with participants that helps shape themes during the data analysis process (Merriam, 2002). Due to this collaboration, unexpected themes often emerge that can best be viewed using a theoretical lens (Merriam, 2002). I selected a feminist theoretical lens for its focus on providing a space for women's voices and an understanding of the gendered nature of society—both important concepts when researching body image (Prasad, 2005).

Qualitative design is also interpretive, requiring researchers to postulate an interpretation of what they observe, hear, and understand (Creswell, 2009). The researcher cannot be separated from her own background; therefore, the researcher must position herself continually to help explain her interpretation of the phenomena being studied (Merriam, 2002).

Qualitative research design is especially well suited to this study's goal to ascertain how women make meaning of body image in the college environment. It is important that the phenomena of body image be studied in the participants' natural environment and that a meaningful trusting relationship is established with the researcher. Body image is often a sensitive topic, and the comfort and trust of the participants are crucial to the success of the

research. Inductive analysis and member checking are crucial in identifying the themes that emerge from the research and the meanings participants assign to the phenomena—in this case, body image.

Methodological Approach

This study made use of interpretive phenomenological analysis. Interpretive phenomenological analysis has as a key feature in its focus on personal meaning and sense-making in a particular context and for individuals who share a particular experience (Smith, et al, 2009). This study focused on the personal meaning and sense-making in the college setting for women who were attempting to understand their own body image.

Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA)

Interpretive phenomenological analysis originated in psychology with the work of Smith (1999, as cited by Smith et al., 2009). While some aspects of interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) were evident in previous work, Smith's paper, *Psychology and health*, is credited with introducing the methodology (Smith et al.). IPA is a constructivist, qualitative approach to understanding how individuals make sense of their major life experiences. This methodology enables the researcher to focus on what happens when "the everyday flow of lived experience takes on a particular significance for people" (Smith et al., p. 1). IPA is well suited for the research of body image.

Interpretive phenomenological analysis is informed by phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography (Smith et al., 2009). Similar to phenomenology, phenomena are central to IPA research. IPA researchers are interested in looking in detail at how individuals make meaning of major transitions or phenomena in their lives (Smith et al.). Investigating the

attempt of research participants to make sense of what is happening to them is an interpretive endeavor and is, therefore, informed by the theory of interpretation, also known as hermeneutics (Smith et al.). Idiography strives to understand the meaning of phenomena and describes the study of the individual, who is observed as a unique person with a unique life story and properties setting her apart from others (Nelson & Hayes, 1986). Researchers using IPA are committed to the detailed examination of a particular case within a particular phenomenon. The goal is to make sense of what is happening to *this* particular individual during *this* particular experience (Smith et al., 2009).

Implementation

Researchers using interpretive phenomenological analysis must interpret what participants tell about their lived experience as they, the participants, attempt to make sense of it (Smith et al., 2009). As previously stated, IPA is informed by hermeneutics, the theory of interpretation. IPA is, in essence, double hermeneutics, the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant who is trying to make sense of her experience (Smith et al.). The researcher plays a dual-role in this type of research. The researcher employs the same process as the participant in trying to make sense of what the participant shares while, at the same time, employing those skills more systematically as the researcher has access to the participant's experience only through that participant's account of the experience. Another layer of hermeneutical research exists, as the researcher must also consider the imagined reader. "The reader is trying to make sense of the researcher making sense of the participant making sense of X" (p. 41).

Due to the complexity of the research, most IPA research focuses on a detailed account of cases using a very small, homogeneous sample. The sample is selected purposefully, carefully accounting for many aspects of the participants' experience (Smith et al., 2009). Often referrals are sought from gatekeepers who have contact with potential participants as well as opportunities that would allow for recruitment of the right participants. Snowballing is also used to identify potential participants. Snowballing refers to referrals the researcher receives from current participants (Smith et al.).

A homogeneous sample is important in IPA. "By making the group as uniform as possible according to obvious social factors or other theoretical factors relevant to the study, one can examine in detail psychological variability within the group, by analyzing the pattern of convergence and divergence which arises" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 50). This chapter provides a detailed explanation of the research design which includes the steps employed to ensure a homogeneous sample.

There is no right answer to the question of sample size. The number of participants depends upon the richness of the individual cases and the constraints under which the researcher is working (Smith et al., 2009). The focus of IPA is quality, not quantity. IPA research generally benefits from a focus on a small number of cases, given the complexity of most human phenomena (Smith et al.). For the reasons stated previously, my research focused on the lived experiences of three participants.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Feminist theorists of the body have contributed to philosophy of embodiment and ensured that attention is given to the idea of the body in social and political thought. The

theories provide a general account of the relations between bodies and selves that is valuable in identifying, understanding and making meaning of issues surrounding body image.

Feminist theory seeks to break down barriers that exist among women as well as the barriers that exist between the researcher and the researched. As discussed in Chapter 2, researchers agree that there are numerous feminist methodologies. For the purposes of this research, I selected Bloom's (1998) concepts as a framework for this study.

In her book, *Under the sign of hope: Feminist methodology and narrative interpretation*, Bloom (1998) examined the promises, possibilities, and limitations of feminist theory. According to Bloom, feminist theory resists definition—feminist theory is “alive with contradictions, ambiguities and non-unitariness” (p. 153). While she carefully laid out for the reader, the contradictions and ambiguities of feminist methodologies, Bloom was careful to point out that “methodologies themselves do not fail; what fails us is our expectations that methodology can guarantee particular kinds of experiences or results” (p. 153)

Bloom (1998) identified seven propositions of feminist theory, which she gleaned from various feminist readings: (1) breaking down the one-way hierarchy of traditional interview techniques; (2) ensuring focused and non-judgmental attention to personal narratives; (3) assuming the narrative is true; (4) understanding the stranger-friend-surrogate family continuum; (5) accepting that identification with respondents enhances interpretive ability rather than jeopardizing validity; (6) embracing that identification with respondents can be a powerful source of insight; and (7) providing egalitarian relationships with space to narrate.

In addition to the seven precepts, there are five common concepts across feminist social science (Bloom, 1998). The first concept is the social construction of gender, realizing that narratives are constructed by the individual and are also socially constructed. Second, feminist theory can be used to explore the tensions and contradictions of women's diverse lives and their personal narratives including methods for interpreting and deconstructing narrative data. Third, the importance of the context of the research question can be demonstrated through reports of conflict that provide interesting insights for locating subjectivity and understanding how it is fragmented. Next, carefully and thoughtfully crafted prose exposing the critical self-reflection of the researcher is shared while exposing how the researcher's biography influences interpretation. Finally, the researcher-participant relationship is paramount to convey the realities of feminist research (Bloom).

A woman's view of her body is inexplicably tied to her sense of value and place within society. This "value and place" is often defined by mass-media's portrayal of women (Miles, 2009). It is, therefore, crucial to consider feminist theory when attempting to understand body image and the impact of the body projects women perform. Women experience their bodies in unique ways and are often bound by non-unitary subjectivity (Bloom, 1998). They are also subject to the reality of living in a capitalistic society that markets womanhood in ways that impact women's interpretations of their own bodies (McLaren & Farhmandpur, 2005).

Bloom (1998) posited that feminist theory holds promises, possibilities and limitation; and it resists definition. She also stated that feminist theory is "alive with contradictions, ambiguities and non-unitariness" (p. 153). While there are contradictions and

ambiguities, the tradition also holds promises and possibilities. I believe this is one of the beauties of the feminist tradition.

Research Design

Human subjects approval

Prior to conducting the study, approval from the Institutional Review Board was requested and granted. A copy of the approval appears in Appendix A.

Participants

Qualitative research methods, particularly IPA, require purposeful sampling. This type of sampling offers the researcher insight into a particular phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009).

Participants for this study were identified using purposeful and snowball sampling. Purposeful selection is defined as “a strategy in which particular settings, persons, or activities are selected deliberately in order to provide information that can’t be gotten as well from other choices” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 88). Maxwell (2005) provided four possible rationales for using purposeful sampling to: (1) achieve representation of the location, participants or phenomenon being studied; (2) adequately capture the differences in the population; (3) intentionally examine case studies that reflect theories that were used at the onset of the study; and (4) highlight comparisons in order to distinguish the reasons for differences between participants or locations. The first and fourth rationales were most relevant for this study. The intent was to achieve representation of the phenomenon being studied and to highlight comparisons in order to distinguish reasons for differences between participants.

In addition to purposeful sampling, snowballing was incorporated. Snowballing amounts to referrals of new potential participants by current participants (Smith et al., 2009). Smith et al. (2009) recommended a sample size of three: “it allows one to conduct a detailed analysis of each case – in effect, to develop three separate case studies – but then also allows for the development of a subsequent micro-analysis of similarities and differences across cases” (p. 52). Seidman (2006) agreed that a small, homogeneous sample is powerful: “...the method of in-depth, phenomenological interviewing applied to a sample of participants who all experience similar structural and social conditions gives enormous power to the stories of a relatively few participants” (p. 55). A total of three participants were identified for this study to help ensure case studies and analyses that produced deep, rich, powerful narrative.

White, middle to upper-class, college-educated women are most at risk for dissatisfied body image (Baugh, et al., 2010; Brylinsky, 1990; Hesse-Biber, et al., 2010); therefore, study participants were limited to students enrolled in the university who self-identified as White and middle to upper-class. To guard against the potential for issues surrounding transition, only students who had completed at least one year at the university were included in the participant pool. To ensure a homogenous sample, participants were further limited to undergraduate education majors in good standing with the university. I chose to focus on education majors due to their potential influence on the next generation of young women. Research has indicated that an individual’s background, including her geographical background, plays a role in the development of body image; therefore, participants were limited to those who were raised in a town with a population of less than 40,000 in a single Midwest state. Because this study focused on body image, great care was

taken to ensure a participant pool that shared similar body characteristics. Using the average height and weight for women their age, as reported by the Center for Disease Control, participants were limited to those meeting the following height and weight standards: 5 feet 5 inches (+ or – 2 inches) and 159 pounds (+ or – 20 pounds).

Students were contacted via email and classroom announcements. A email list was purchased from the University which was limited by the following parameters: female, White, undergraduate education majors, from a single mid-western state, having completed at least one year at the University, and in good standing. An invitation to participate in the research study was sent to 431 individuals resulting in 8 responses, 3 of whom were viable research candidates. Classroom announcements were made in two education courses, resulting in 10 additional responses. No viable candidates were identified through the classroom announcements. Copies of the e-mail and phone scripts used to contact participants appear in Appendix B-1. Once contacted, I used a screening survey to select the most homogeneous sample possible. Participants received a \$20 gift card to iTunes as incentive to participate (Appendix B-2).

Each participant signed an informed consent form prior to participating in the study. The form included a brief description of the study, procedures, potential benefits and risks, and measures to protect confidentiality (Appendix B-3). During the interview process, one participant disclosed that she was from a small town located in a neighboring state, thus challenging the research design. The participant fit all other participant criteria and shared a number of similarities with other participants. Additionally, the small town she identified as home had possessed common characteristics as compared with the hometowns of other participants. Reviewing the common characteristics of this participant and revisiting the

original intent of the research design, to obtain a homogeneous sample, I made the decision to retain all three original participants.

Site selection

This study was conducted at a large, predominately white, research-intensive institution located in the Midwest. The university is one of the nation's premiere land-grant universities. According to its website, the university enrolls nearly 30,000 students from all 50 states and more than 100 other countries. Academic courses are administered through eight colleges that offer more than 100 bachelor's and master's degree programs, and more than 80 programs at the Ph.D. and professional level.

I selected this university as my research site because the site is a predominately white institution of higher education that enrolls more than 10,000 female undergraduate students each year, almost 90% of whom are white, thus ensuring a large pool from which to recruit participants. The geographic proximity of the institution was conducive to the use of a modified three-tier interview model (Seidman, 2006), which is discussed in greater detail in the next subsection.

Research methods and data collection

This qualitative, interpretive phenomenological study, with a constructionist epistemology, employed semi-structured in-depth interviews designed using a modification of Seidman's three-tier interview model (Seidman, 2006). Semi-structured, one-on-one, in-depth interviews and personal diaries prove to be most successful in soliciting thoughts and feelings from participants (Smith et al., 2009). Interviews to obtain a rich, detailed, first-person account of the individuals' experience are scheduled with a few essential guiding

questions and topics, and participants are encouraged to elaborate. This enables the participant's perspective on body image to be articulated and uncovered as she experiences it. The first interview in this study focused on the participant's life history in light of the issue of body image (approximately 60-90 minutes). The second interview focused on the details of the experience of body image throughout the participant's life. The participants were asked guiding questions based upon information obtained during the first interview. In the third interview, participants were asked to focus on the meaning of their lived experience with body image. A copy of the interview guides appears in Appendix B-4. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. Transcripts of the interviews were shared with participants for member-checking and clarification. The recordings and transcriptions were kept in a locked file. All participants were assigned a pseudonym, and identities and pseudonyms were kept in a separate locked file.

Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted using a multi-phased approach (Creswell, 2009; Esterberg 2002; Merriam, 2002). First, I began content analysis by organizing and preparing my data (Creswell, 2009). Transcriptions of interviews were divided into meaning units to make analysis and theme development easier (Merriam, 2002). Open coding was used, conducting a line-by-line analysis of the interview transcripts and observation notes (Esterberg, 2002).

Similarities and patterns were analyzed, keeping in mind the study's epistemology, and theoretical and philosophical underpinnings. From these patterns, themes were identified (Esterberg, 2002). Themes, patterns and similarities were shared with participants for

member-checking, debriefing and feedback in order to ensure the goodness of my research (Creswell, 2009). Transcripts, field notes and artifacts were reviewed to complete focused coding (Esterberg, 2002). The focused coding primarily honed in on relevant phenomenon, examples of that phenomenon, and commonalities among the different data sources (Creswell, 2009).

Trustworthiness and Validity

Trustworthiness is a central element of establishing the credibility of a qualitative research study. Creswell (2009) referred to trustworthiness as validity and reliability, pointing to the procedures a qualitative researcher follows to ensure the accuracy and consistency of her methods and analysis. To ensure the validity of the study, sensitivity to context was also considered (Merriam, 2002). This included establishing an awareness of existing literature, carefully crafting interviews and recording verbatim extracts to ensure that voice was given to participants and used to support interpretations and avoid generalized claims (Smith et al., 2009). A commitment to rigor, attention to participant voice, and thoroughness of study were crucial (Yardley, 2000). Transparency and coherence in this study were ensured by clearly defining all aspects and stages of the research. As the researcher, I used care to provide a coherent argument that relates to theoretical assumptions and maintained a chain of evidence that can easily be followed by another researcher.

Internal validity

Creswell (2009) and Merriam (2002) identified several strategies to strengthen a study's internal validity including: triangulation, member checks, and peer review/debriefing.

Triangulation

Triangulation uses a number of different data sources to justify findings and themes (Creswell, 2009). Four types of triangulation—multiple investigators, multiple theories, multiple sources of data, and multiple methods—are used to confirm emerging findings (Merriam, 2002). Triangulation in this study was accomplished in several ways. I conducted multiple interviews for primary data. Interviews with multiple participants enabled me to collect data from a variety of perspectives. Field notes and journals kept during the research phase of the study provided supplemental data and were used as a resource during data analysis. Additionally, artifacts collected during interviews were considered during data analysis. These artifacts included the initial screening survey, results of a celebrity size comparison activity, and journal excerpts and photos volunteered by participants.

Member checking

Member checking was used to determine the accuracy of my research findings. Member checking refers to the strategy of involving participants in the data analysis and theme development stage of the research process (Esterberg, 2002; Merriam, 2002). Participants were asked to review transcripts of their interviews; corrections, changes, and/or deletions were invited and incorporated into the findings. Additionally, I presented themes, case analysis, and portions of the final product to participants in order to determine whether the participants believed the findings were accurate (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2002).

Peer review/debriefing

Peer review, or debriefing, was used to enhance the accuracy of the research (Creswell, 2009). The process of peer review refers to the use of uninvolved, yet educated, peers to gather differing perspectives about findings as well as to check the researcher's analyses (Merriam, 2002). I identified two peers who reviewed my research and asked questions about the study and findings. These peers were fellow doctoral students in the School of Education who were trained in qualitative research methodology. These individuals took their role seriously and challenged me during each stage of the research process. Peer review helped ensure that I was aware of my role and bias in the study, and helped prevent my emotions and preconceptions from impacting the research process. This strategy, which involves interpretation beyond me as the researcher, adds trustworthiness to the study (Creswell, 2009).

Reliability

Reliability in qualitative research refers to the extent to which findings are consistent with the data collected (Merriam, 2002). In other words, others agree that results make sense given the data that are collected. To ensure reliability within this study I maintained a clear audit trail and clearly stated my positionality.

Audit trail

A well-maintained audit trail will enable future researchers to understand how the study was crafted and conducted. An audit trail is a "detailed account of the methods, procedures, and decision points in carrying out the study" (Merriam, 2002, p. 31). I maintained a journal, and completed research memos throughout the study and analysis of

the data to document my audit trail. The journal and memos were made available to peer reviewers to ensure validity and reliability.

Researcher role and positionality

As the primary investigator, I was also the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. My principal responsibilities were to develop relationships and gain the trust of the research participants while maintaining ethical behavior at all times.

I personally subscribe to a constructivist worldview. I believe that individuals seek to make meaning of the world in which they live based upon historical and social perspectives (Creswell, 2009). We are all born into a world where meaning is bestowed upon us by our culture; therefore, it is crucial that my positionality is clearly stated in an attempt to bracket my research (Merriam, 2002). I grew up in a close-knit farm family with well-educated parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles. I was taught to respect and love the land and those who care for it. I lived in a homogeneous community with a population of 600 that was predominately white and lower-middle class, although my family struggled financially during my early childhood.

Because of the homogeneous, white, Anglo-Saxon, protestant nature of the community, small differences in appearance became exaggerated and often a source of ridicule. Body size and shape often differentiated the sameness of the residents. This led to body-image issues for many of my high school classmates. Nevertheless, I was strangely immune to this effect despite the attention my tall, full-figured presence often garnered.

One would expect that I would have had a rather narrow world view based upon the geography of my childhood; however, my parents must have realized the importance of

exposing us to those who were different from us. They invited international students who were studying agriculture at Iowa State University to stay with us during university breaks. My parents encouraged the student visitors to teach us about their cultures. This experience was a tremendous gift that, at the time, I did not realize I was receiving. I believe it is because of these experiences that I welcomed the “difference” in my appearance.

As a doctoral student at Iowa State University, I have been studying educational leadership and policy in higher education. In addition, I am currently employed in professional and career development and academic assistance at a small, selective, private Midwestern university. I have a background in counseling, and have worked with traditional-aged college students for many years. As a middle-aged woman, I do not currently participate in the lived experiences of today’s traditional-aged college student; however, my relationship as the mother of a teenage daughter and my position working with this population has given me insight about this demographic.

As a professional and researcher, I am committed to exposing the injustices that often exist for the “other” and understanding how individuals construct their realities based on their interactions with the world in which they live. In my profession, I am exposed to students who struggle to determine their educational and career goals. I am drawn to the topic of body image due to an increased occurrence of students presenting complaints of a dissatisfied body image and its impact on their education.

External validity and generalizability

When working within qualitative research, and particularly interpretive phenomenological analysis, the researcher and reader must think in terms of theoretical

transferability rather than empirical generalizability (Smith et al., 2009). Many argue the value of qualitative research lies in the themes and descriptions developed in a particular context (Creswell, 2009). The goal of this study was to provide a rich, transparent and contextualized analysis of the accounts of the participants, enabling others to evaluate its transferability to individuals who are similar (Smith et al.).

Thick and rich description

Rich, thick description can add to the validity of qualitative research (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2002). This type of description refers to providing detailed description of settings and participants so that the reader may be transported to that location with the participant (Creswell, 2009). The description may also provide multiple perspectives about a theme making it more realistic and richer (Creswell, 2009). I attempted to balance the use of rich, thick description with member checking to ensure readability, accuracy and depth of my study.

Ethical Issues

Ethical research practice is a dynamic process and should be monitored throughout data gathering, analysis, and reporting (Smith et al, 2009). Participants were asked to read and sign an informed consent document to ensure their complete understanding of their rights and responsibilities during the study. In interpretive phenomenological analysis, the informed consent was important not only for data gathering, but also data reporting, specifically the reporting of verbatim extracts from interviews in final reports and publications (Smith et al., 2009). Participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identity. They were also provided with the opportunity to review sensitive extracts prior to

publication. Participants had the right to withdraw at any time during data collection (although not from the study once the data collection was completed). Due to the sensitive nature of the subject matter, participants were provided with information regarding appropriate support if an interview proved to be upsetting. Nevertheless, during the study, no participant reported discomfort or sought additional support.

Delimitations

The literature supports the fact that both men and women have distorted body image; however, women appear to attach different meanings to their body images. The current study was delimited to female, undergraduate students at a large Midwestern university. Researchers also concur that body image is an issue among college women and this distortion appears to be culturally enhanced. Most at risk are middle- to upper-class, White, college-educated women in Westernized countries (Brylinsky, 1990). Accordingly, this study was also delimited to White, female students at a predominately white institution. The number of participants in this study was delimited to five to ensure the depth and richness of data as well as the participants' ability to complete multiple interviews.

Limitations

Semi-structured qualitative interviews involve unstructured and open-ended questions intended to elicit information, views and opinions from participants (Creswell, 2009). The findings of this study were limited in four key ways as a result of this approach. In qualitative interviews, the participants provided their interpretations of events that were filtered through their own views and, therefore, may have been biased or based upon inaccurate memories. The setting of the interviews was not natural and may have influenced

responses, and the presence of the researcher may also have biased responses. Additionally, the use of a semi-structured interview approach may have resulted in unasked questions.

CHAPTER 4. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

An interpretive phenomenological analysis approach was used in this study. This chapter includes participant profiles, their views regarding body image, and a detailed discussion of the findings. The findings are organized into major themes identified during the analysis. Major themes include: relationships with female relatives, media influence, relationships with individuals with disabilities, and the impact of participation in athletics on body image. These themes emerged from interviews conducted with each participant as well as a review of archival and survey data.

Data Analysis Process

The focus of interpretive phenomenological analysis is on the participants' attempt to make sense of their experiences surrounding a particular phenomenon, in this case, body image in the college environment (Smith et al., 2009). In order to accomplish this task the researcher undertakes an analysis process described by Smith et al. as an iterative and inductive cycle. There is no single correct process for analysis using interpretive phenomenological analysis; conversely, the method calls for agility, flexibility, and creativity. I used the following steps to analyze data:

1. Transcripts were read and re-read while listening to audio recordings of the interviews to capture and ascertain nuances of language, tone, and pauses.
2. A close, line-by-line analysis of the experiences, concerns and understandings of the participants was completed. Coding was completed by hand on the initial transcript to enhance free flowing commentary. Attention was given to the participants' use of language surrounding relationships and body image, their thinking about the

phenomenon, and more abstract concepts that helped bring meaning to their accounts (Smith et al., 2009).

3. Emergent themes were identified first across a single case, and second through a careful comparison across multiple cases. Care was taken to review areas of convergence, divergence, commonality, and nuance. Attention was given to abstraction and subsumption when identifying themes:

Abstraction is a basic form of identifying patterns between emergent themes and developing a sense of what can be called a 'super-ordinate' theme. It involves putting like with like and developing a new name for the cluster... [Subsumption] is similar to abstraction but it operates where an emergent theme itself acquires a super-ordinate status as it helps bring together a series of related themes. (Smith et al., 2009, pp. 96-97)

Polarization, or examining transcripts for opposition between emergent themes, was also considered as well as numeration, or the frequency in which themes emerge within individual cases and across multiple cases (Smith et al., 2009).

4. Identified themes were analyzed and an interpretive account was developed to ascertain what this might mean.
5. A frame, or structure, was developed to illustrate the relationship among themes. This will be presented and discussed in Chapter 5.
6. All findings were shared with participants for member checking as well as peers for review to ensure a collaborative audit to test interpretations and develop coherence.
7. Finally, as the researcher, I reflected on my own process and perceptions regarding the phenomena experienced by the participants. The reflection included a review of the journals and memos I maintained throughout the study as well as a careful analysis of my own positionality.

Background of the Participants

Body image research, using interpretive phenomenological analysis, requires an understanding of a participant's background, relationships, interactions with society, and view of self (Smith et al., 2009). Each participant's hometown, family environment and relationships—all impact her understanding of herself and society. For this reason, a small homogenous sample was interviewed. While all shared commonalities—size of home town, university major, physical build, middle-class income, and age—each participant's background differed slightly in important ways. One participant had divorced parents; another had only sisters; two had only brothers; and, while two lived in the same hometown their entire life, another moved between the Midwest and the South, attending middle and high school in the Midwest. Additionally, one participant attended a private high school rather than a public school as the other participants had done.

Interviews with the participants were conducted in the same academic building. This location was selected because it was familiar to all of the participants, as they each attended class there. While the building remained a constant for all interviews, the conference room used for individual interviews differed.

Grace

My first interview took place in a conference room located in a primary education building at the university where Grace attended. As I waited for Grace's arrival, I had the usual anxieties and concerns of a novice researcher. Would I make her feel comfortable working with me? What kind of participant would she be? Was she as nervous as I? The conference room didn't ease my nerves. It was large and impersonal, and a bit on the chilly

side. The large windows overlooking a central courtyard were the only non-sterile component to the room. The green trees, in contrast with the brick building and archways, added warmth the room appeared to need. I strategically arranged the room to enable Grace to view the courtyard, and propped the door open in a welcoming gesture.

The moment I met Grace, my nerves dissipated. Grace was a senior elementary education major with an endorsement in special education. I knew from my screening survey that she was 5' 6" tall and weighed 145 lbs. Viewing her build, it was apparent every pound she carried was muscle. She was a slim, slightly pear-shaped, 21-year-old, with light brown hair and a ready smile. After brief introductions, we settled into our chairs and began the interview process. We developed an easy rapport and progressed seamlessly from superficial topics to more intense, and sometimes tear-provoking, matters. Grace, the ideal research participant, opened herself completely and shared intimate details readily. Grace's enthusiasm was almost hyperactive, jumping from one topic to the next without transition. I quickly realized the importance of recording our sessions.

Grace was raised in a small, Midwestern, suburban town located a few minutes from the university. Her parents had divorced shortly after she graduated from high school, which pleased her greatly. She reported begging her mother to divorce her father for several years. She believed her grandmother "rescued" her mother from a bad marriage because her mother used her grandmother's estate to finance her divorce. Grace maintained very close relationships with extended female relatives, especially her mother and grandmother.

While Grace reported a close relationship with her mother, she was estranged from her father. The estrangement resulted from years of physical and verbal abuse suffered at the hands of her alcoholic father. Grace had one brother who was three years younger. She was

not close with her brother and viewed him as an overly sensitive momma's boy, stating: *"I'm more of a boy than Thomas."* The only close male relationship that Grace reported was with a male friend who is gay. Grace fully admitted that she feared being hurt by men.

Grace attended a very small high school, with a total enrollment of less than 400 students. She considered herself an outsider and never really felt that she fit "in." While in high school, Grace took classes at the university. After graduating from high school, Grace attended a smaller state school also located in the Midwest. Again, she struggled with the isolation of feeling as though she were an outsider. She explained, *"It was more of, like, small town people at the college and I'm not small-town people."* She reported that the university was a better fit for her but that she still often felt as though she was an outsider:

I'm not a hippie but I'm kind of like more of the free spirit. Like I walk into class with my yoga mat; and I go on kayaking trips with the kayaking club like that's not your usual teaching major.

Grace reported only one serious romantic relationship. This occurred during high school and was not a good experience. Grace disclosed that she dated and had several "flings" during college; however, she indicated that she was still a virgin. She explained the fact that she was a virgin often confused people because they automatically assumed she abstained for religious reasons. That was not the case. As reported previously, Grace admitted she had difficulty trusting men and was afraid she would be hurt by them. She believed this may have been connected to her relationship with her father. Grace admitted that she was often intimidated by attractive men stating, *"I'm just going to cut to the chase. Yes, I'm insecure around hot guys."*

Research in the literature has revealed that discussions surrounding body image are often difficult for the participant, so I approached this topic with great care with Grace.

There was no need to worry. Grace spoke about her body as easily as she did about her lunch plans. She described herself as “skinny” and “scrawny” during her middle and high school years. She mentioned frequently that her mother was one of the larger girls in high school; and her mother often commented that she was relieved that Grace did not share this attribute.

I was actually nine pounds eight ounces when I was born; so you know, my mom just thought I was going to be a big, heavy girl just like she was through school instead of one of the scrawny ones - the skinny, scrawny ones.

During our interviews, Grace described her current self as “skinny durable”:

I call myself skinny durable. Um, it's one of my jokes. You know, the toothpicks? Like, if they fall off a cliff, they're screwed; but if I fall off the cliff, I'll be fine because I've got a little padding. You know what I mean? Like, that's what skinny durable means.

Grace shared that she had fairly good body image and was confident in her appearance. She liked her height and was proud of her flat stomach. In addition to “skinny durable”, Grace defined herself a proportional—none of her parts were too large or too small. When asked about her most attractive feature, she answered that she knows what she wants and she believed that makes her attractive. Despite her confidence, Grace was not fully satisfied with her body. She disliked her thighs and calves and believed she had a bigger butt:

I think if someone saw me sitting at a table, I'd think they would just think that I'd have like toothpick legs and once I stand it's like oh, she's got a little thickness to her.

“Realistic” is how Grace describes her view of her body, while focusing on her family's genes, “Granted my genes this is pretty fricken good!”

I'm flipping through, like you know, my aunt's photos and, um, the real turning moment for me honestly was, um, when I got to my great grandmas and stuff. So, that side is all Czech, ok? So, we're all talking big, thick, tree trunk legs, like, man-looking women, okay? So like, as soon as I saw those

pictures I was like, oh my God, I am so thankful that (1) I look like a girl, and (2) my legs are not as big as those tree trunks. Like, those legs are huge!

The theme of accepting her genetic make-up was common throughout each interview with Grace.

Isabelle

The first interview with Isabelle was scheduled one hour after I completed my interview with Grace. Reflecting on the completed interview, I quickly realized that my counseling background and listening skills did not automatically translate into being a good researcher. The careful silences I used successfully in counseling did not always help build the rapport that was necessary in feminist research. As I prepared for my meeting with Isabelle, I refocused on giving careful attention to her responses and, more importantly, non-judgmental validation of her answers. My goal was to create an interview that was more of a conversation between friends.

Isabelle, a 20 year-old sophomore education major with an endorsement in special education, presented a stark contrast to Grace's exuberance. During our first meeting, Isabelle was quiet and reserved, obviously uncertain what to expect from our meetings. According to the screening survey, she was 5' 6" tall and weighed 140 lbs. I agreed with Isabelle's self-assessment that she was slightly pear shaped. Her brown hair was long and straight, and flowed neatly over her trendy scarf. I learned later that she worked hard to tame her naturally curly hair into the smooth strands I observed during that initial visit. After brief and hesitant introductions, we began our interview. I discovered that Isabelle was very organized and structured in both her responses and in her life. She indicated that she lived by a schedule, and her organization was apparent in her carefully worded answers.

Isabelle described a very close and open relationship with her large extended family. She has three sisters, ages 22, 16, and 14, the oldest of whom was adopted. Isabelle indicated that she always knew that her sister was adopted but that others were often surprised despite the differences in their appearance:

To me it was completely normal and other people would be like, 'your sister doesn't look like you,' and, like me and my sisters, we all have brown curly hair and my sister has like super fair skin, blonde hair, nothing like us. 'No, your sister doesn't look like you' and I'm like 'yep, she's adopted.'

Isabelle spoke with great respect and admiration when she described her parents. She joked that she was going into the family business. Both her parents were teachers, as well as most of her aunts and uncles. Similarly to Grace, Isabelle considered her mom to be one of her best friends, and reported that she had a very open and honest relationship with both of her parents. Isabelle's attachment to family extended beyond her nuclear family to extended relatives. She specifically reported a close relationship with her paternal aunts: *"My aunts on my dad's side are just probably, like, two of the coolest people I've ever met."*

Isabelle attended a small Catholic elementary school, kindergarten through 5th grade, and transferred to a large public high school. Of the three participants, Isabelle attended the largest high school, with about 1,400 students. Isabelle reported an active social life and stated that her eclectic group of friends was selected because of their fun-loving nature; because she believed they balanced her quiet personality well. She described her friends as *"a hodgepodge of different kinds of personalities."* She and her best friend have had a relationship since they were in daycare together at the age of four. She reported having a few short romantic relationships. Her first romantic relationship, in high school, was a positive experience, with the young man telling her that she was perfect the way she was. She stated

that she was romantically attracted to men who were nice and honest but did not take themselves too seriously. She wanted a mate who was playful and had a sense of humor.

Isabelle was very confident in her body image and credits her mother and aunts, who share her body confidence. Her female relatives advised her to accept her body unconditionally, as was expressed in the following: *“My aunts have all been very, like you know, you gotta work with what you’re given.”*

Isabelle was very pragmatic about her body. She stated that she liked her body because it made her happy. She indicated that she did not diet to be thin, but she did watch what she consumed in order to be healthy. She believed that *“bigger”* girls were more attractive to men, because they are better suited for reproduction. She reported reading several fashion magazines and loved to shop; but she was concerned by trends in the media that encouraged women to be ultra-thin: *“You don’t have to be stick thin; and it’s sad that somebody decides size six is a plus-sized model – then I’m a plus-sized model.”*

When asked what she liked about her body, she immediately selected her eyes. In contrast, she disliked her chest and a small scar just under the right side of her lips. Isabelle believed her family influenced her body image greatly. She indicated that her family believed that everybody was beautiful in their own unique way, which enabled her to accept herself and her body.

Hope

Hope was one of the first to respond to the invitation to participate in research. She completed the screening survey the day she received the soliciting email. As a novice researcher, I assumed this was indicative of the ease with which I would be able to schedule

meetings. This assumption was soon proven faulty. Attempts to reach Hope via email and phone messages were unsuccessful for a period of four weeks. As the time progressed, my trepidation grew. Would she be responsive during the interview? Could I count on her to be present for the interview? The trepidation was unnecessary. Hope was ten minutes early for her first interview and approached the process enthusiastically.

The first interview with Hope was scheduled in a small conference room in the same building where the interviews with Grace and Isabelle had occurred. The conference room was smaller and more intimate than the large conference room where Grace's and Isabelle's interviews were held. While the room was institutional, one entire wall was composed of windows. The steam heat radiators clacked and clinked as they worked to take the late fall nip out of the air, while bright orange and yellow leaves fluttered outside the windows.

A 20 year-old, sophomore education major, Hope was 5' 7" tall and weighed an athletic 160 lbs. Her curly brunette hair hung in masses around her shoulders as she eased into a chair at the conference table. She was dressed in a simple button-down blouse and jeans, and seemed at ease as she crossed her legs and smiled warmly. She was very animated and gestured widely during the interview. I was not surprised to learn that she was active in theater during high school.

Hope was born in a small Midwestern town, moved to Georgia between the ages of two and nine, and returned to the Midwest at the age of ten. She attended a small private high school with an enrollment of less than 180, and took full advantage of the athletic and theatre departments while attending there. Soccer was her primary sport but she also participated in basketball. She credited athletics with giving her confidence as well as a solid sense of her body.

Family was important to Hope, and she reported that she had a close relationship with her nuclear family. She described her parents' marriage as healthy and supportive. Her two brothers, ages 21 and 14, shared a typical sibling relationship with her. Hope's older brother was born prematurely, and her mother chose to leave work to care for him. She returned to work recently. Because her mother was the primary disciplinarian, Hope reported that she often had confrontations with her mother, and they did not share as close a relationship as she and her father. Hope's father was trained as an electrical engineer and recently received a master's degree in business. Hope admitted that she shared her father's relaxed approach to life.

Hope reported having a very eclectic group of friends both during high school and at the university. She was very comfortable having close friendships with both men and women. Hope reported maintaining a friendship with the same best friend since 4th grade and, at the time of the interview, she shared a room at the university with her friend. Hope believed her friends were similar to herself, and described herself as a "goofball" who was also a "studious nerd." While she reported having a strong social life in high school and in college, she shared that she had never had a "*real*" romantic relationship. Romantically, she reported that she tended to be attracted to a mellow personality who did not take himself too seriously. She also believed that it was important to have a shared interest and, for that reason, was usually attracted to "*sporty-types*."

Hope reported that she was very satisfied with her pear-shaped body and credited her faith along with her participation in athletics. Regarding the relationship between her faith and her body image, she shared the following during an interview session: "*When the Lord of the universe perfectly made you a certain way, you feel a little bit confident about yourself.*"

She believed that participating in sports also gave her confidence and the realization that her body allowed her perform:

Being, like, a taller girl or, like, a bigger girl may not be the best thing, you know, sitting in fourth grade class; but on the basketball court or on the soccer field, it was, you know like, a good thing. My coaches loved the fact that ... I could use my body to, you know, their advantage.

This strong sense of satisfaction with her body was not always the case for Hope. She reported struggling with her body image during puberty. For her, puberty brought a rapid change in appearance, from long, straight blond hair to curly, brunette hair with an accompanying case of acne. She came to terms with her acne scarring after starting college and no longer wore make-up daily for a cover-up. She also reported appreciating her curly hair now that she knew how to tame it. Her favorite body part was her lips, and she showed her sense of humor in the following description: *"I've always been a fan of my lips. I've just always loved their shape and, they're very consistent. They've never had a bad day."* She claimed a love-hate relationship with her legs—loving their strength and hating their size.

Hope had a unique understanding of the media and its portrayal of women. She understood that media images are often altered to make the model appear more slim and attractive. She also understood that she could not look like a model who did not share her body shape. She credited her high school with health education and media awareness. Participation in athletics and the impact of media education were consistent themes throughout my interviews with Hope.

In summary, the participants were all elementary education majors, from small Midwestern towns, and they shared a similar body structure and size. They all self-identified

as white and middle-class, and had attended the university for at least one year. They differed in family structure as well as size and type of high school. All three participants reported fairly satisfied body image. Since the purpose of this study was to investigate how women make meaning of body image, the “theme” of body image must be addressed separately from the emergent themes. When making meaning of body image, two related themes were identified: (a) the impact of puberty and (b) the body projects young women undertake (i.e., altering their bodies to appear more acceptable in the society in which they live) as a result of their perceived body image.

Body Image

Each of the young women in the study shared her thoughts and feelings regarding body image in a surprisingly open and unguarded manner. I had prepared myself for the need to extract information carefully so as to not harm the women. I discovered that they were not only willing to share their beliefs about body image, but also seemed almost hungry to do so. Body image, all participants agreed, was a topic of concern for women their age. Hope summarized the common feelings of all three participants during her first interview: *“I think body image can just really affect your psyche or just you in general. It can, I think, influence your actions. I think it can change your personality.”*

Appearance, according to all of the participants, was a primary concern of young women in college. Again, Hope captured the reason for this concern when asked about the importance of appearance: *“I feel like appearance just in a world where everyone has eyeballs is important, because ... you’re judged on your appearance. You know, if I was going into a professional setting, I’d be judged on my appearance.”*

Each of the participants reported being satisfied with their appearance; yet all discussed the body projects in which they participated in order to enhance their appearance. Most common, as reported by all of the participants, was the use of clothing to enhance or de-emphasize portions of their bodies. Most often, the participants minimized the size of their hips and thighs while trying to enhance the size of their bust-line. All three participants also reported using makeup to enhance their physical appearance; although, the use of makeup decreased after puberty, primarily because acne was no longer an issue.

Acne was a common concern for the young women, especially during puberty. “Pimples are a natural part of biological maturation, but the meaning we give to them is derived from the culture in which we live” (Brumberg, 1997). The inability to control acne breakouts or the resulting scarring was a chief complaint and led the young women to avoid attending events or to use excessive amounts of makeup to conceal the acne. Grace shared a great deal about her struggle with acne, including the need to be placed on a strong acne medication. While Grace’s acne was, for the most part, well controlled at the time of our interview and she reported a fairly positive body image, acne could still impact her confidence:

I remember last year I had this really ugly zit on my face and, like, I just I just didn't want to go out, you know, I just felt ugly. It's really unfortunate but sometimes there's just that one huge zit that you just don't feel like socializing with people and trying to get all dressed up, it's like, “no, I'll just stay inside

Because the young women I interviewed were all pear-shaped, they reported being displeased with their butt, thighs, and calves intermittently throughout their lives. As previously mentioned, all three participants used clothing to adjust their figures. The participants all had periods of time during which they were displeased with their appearance.

These times were often off-set by positive encouragement from family and friends. Each of the young women had a positive relationship with someone who encouraged her to be herself, and told her she was beautiful the way she was. Grace's experience was slightly different from that of Hope and Isabelle. Grace's mother told her she was relieved that Grace was thin and did not appear to have inherited the genes of the women on her side of the family, thus presenting a positive message with strong ties to a negative message about being overweight. Hope and Isabelle reported a more positive sense of approval as was captured in the following excerpt from an interview with Isabelle:

My dad always told me and my sister, "You're pretty the way you are. Like, that's how you were made. You can't do a whole lot to change it. You don't need to change how you look to please somebody else."

As a result of this positive influence, the participants reported perceiving beauty differently than would be expected based upon a review of literature. They tended to first determine if the individual was happy and healthy and then accept the way she looked. Grace, who reported feeling like more of an outsider than the other participants, believed that she viewed beauty differently than others. She shared the experience of joining in a game at a vendor booth, answering questions about beauty. She explained that her answers were significantly different from her peers who also participated, which resulted in being offered a totally different product that was created to appear more natural. Based upon this experience, Grace offered the following explanation:

I think the way I perceive beauty is different than others. Some people feel the need to go all out - wake up at 6 in the morning and just deck out; and you know what? Sometimes I look really good but at the same time, you spent two hours this morning doing that, it's like, it's not natural so I think I am more attracted to natural beauty.

The three participants all reported a generally positive view of their bodies; however, they did indicate that this view could vary greatly depending upon the day. Showing her typical sense of humor, Hope described this phenomenon in the following extract:

I would say a majority of the time [I am] content with my body. Some of the time I love it and then you know it varies like kind of like a normal bell shape curve.

In stark contrast to the review of literature, the participants took a pragmatic approach to understanding their own body image:

I don't hate my body. I don't get up in the morning and just look at my body and see some new stuff there. I'm just like this is what I was given, just gotta work with it, you know? I work with what I'm given, just play up the good parts or downplay the bad parts. [Isabelle]

I was looking in the mirror and was like "you know what?" This is good enough. You know what I mean? [Grace]

I would always see my legs as, like, huge but then I kept telling myself "well there's a reason why – you exercise, you need them to play soccer, things like that." [Hope]

During the interviews the participants were asked to define how being a woman impacted their life at the university. One of the women (Grace) did not feel that being a woman at the university had a positive or negative impact. Hope and Isabelle both indicated that they experienced some gender-based expectations during their time at the university. When they shared with fellow students that they were majoring in elementary education, the reaction was that it was expected because they were women. Isabelle also stated that she had experienced gender role expectations when interacting socially with males. The men often expected her to enjoy cooking and cleaning because she was a woman.

When asked if they believed their experience would be different if their appearance were different, all three participants focused on cultural and racial differences when first

answering the inquiry. When prompted to explore the concept by focusing on their potential experience if their body shape and size were different, their responses focused on society's perceptions of ideal. Isabelle discussed the tendency of society to judge people based upon appearance:

People tend to judge you in society if you're not like a certain weight and if you're like overweight and like fat. Like they judge you; but if you're, like, skinnier then they tend to, like, be more positive towards you.

Um, if I was like, extremely overweight, I'm sure people would just stare at me and just make judgments even if they didn't even know my story.

A portion of the interviews focused on body-image satisfaction and the potential to augment their current bodies surgically. Again, the participants were fairly satisfied with their bodies. They tended to focus on their own contentment with how their bodies felt and what their bodies allowed them to do rather than society's expectations. Isabelle summarized the feelings of the participants in this excerpt answering the question, "Are you satisfied with your body?"

Yes, because I'm trying to think of a way to put this, um, because it makes me happy; and if it doesn't make anybody else happy that's kind of their own problem.

When discussing the potential of surgical augmentation of their bodies, each of the participants mentioned breast enhancement as a consideration, but quickly retracted their statement, indicating that they would not truly complete the process. The participants agreed that changing their appearance to meet society's expectations would not have any long-term impact on their experience. Grace, using humor, explained the limited impact a breast augmentation would have on her life experience:

I don't think it [augmenting my breast size] would change that much. I mean one more guy would talk to me at the bar; but I don't think it would really

change that much. I'd actually probably find something else to complain about my body.

When discussing body size, the participants tended to be more concerned about women who were excessively thin than those who were overweight. The only time any of the participants indicated concern about overweight women was when discussing individuals who were morbidly obese. Even when discussing who they would least like to resemble, they focused on excessively thin celebrities. I found this to be interesting and wondered if their responses may have been influenced by my appearance as the researcher. Some would classify me as overweight and their responses may have been tailored to spare my feelings. Regardless, when talking about weight, the participants focused on health and happiness. Isabelle summarized the feelings of the participants in the following statement about her body:

I think of my body and, like, my health as, like, precious. Like, I only get one; and so I've got to do it right the first time.

As previously stated, the participants reported and demonstrated a positive body image; however, this was not always the case. During puberty, each of the participants reported feelings of a dissatisfied body image.

Puberty

Puberty is often a difficult and confusing time for young girls. Girls are instructed in the hygiene involved with their menstruation, but are not guided through the bodily changes, social expectations, and personal realizations that accompany puberty (Brumberg, 1997). These bodily changes are often rapid and unexpected. Hope stated her experience during puberty was especially challenging:

It hit me hard. I have curly brown hair. Growing up I had straight blonde hair; and so, just, the transition was not, like, a really smooth one, it was like “boom” things are happening.

Hope’s appearance changed drastically during puberty. She morphed from a girl with long, straight, blonde hair to young woman with acne, hips, and curly brown hair. The transition, in her own words, was “*not smooth.*” Both Hope and Isabelle reflected on suddenly being larger than the other girls in their grade. In hindsight, Hope reflected that she was not necessarily heavier than the other girls, but was taller: “*I would not necessarily say I wasn’t really that chubby; but in my eyes, it was, like, I was, you know, just bigger than everyone else.*”

Whereas Hope never felt the need to diet in as a result of feeling larger, Isabelle considered a weight-loss plan:

In, like, seventh and eighth grade and, like, my freshman year of high school, I was really big into, like, I need to lose weight, I need to diet, I need to be a certain size. All the other girls in my grade are really skinny, like, oh my gosh, I’m I feel like gigantic compared to them; but I really wasn’t. And um, I just felt like I was, like, ugly compared to them; but as I got older, it was more of, like, I became more comfortable with who I am and just kind of grew up and matured and just accepted that’s this was me.

Grace experienced puberty very differently than did Hope and Isabelle. While Hope and Isabelle developed rapidly, Grace entered puberty later than others in her grade. She recalled the frustration of being smaller than everyone and still resembling a child while her classmates all had the appearance of young adults. She also lamented, in the following excerpt, the fact that her bust developed much later than her female counterparts:

I think I was a little upset because I was a late bloomer... I know I made jokes about it, um, because I, like, looked significantly, like, smaller; so, like, my boobs again. Like, you know how everyone calls them jugs? I called them school milk cartons.

It was during puberty that all three participants reported beginning to paying attention to fashion magazines. Clothing became a means to enhance or diminish the attention given to certain parts of the body. The participants all began to exert more control over their appearances through makeup, hair, and clothing selection. All three participants talked about the frustration of shopping for clothes because items did not fit the same as before puberty or because, in Grace's case, she was still relegated to the styles located in the children's section. Clothing size also became a point of contention when larger sizes were needed. Hope reflected on the desire to wear a smaller size in the following description of shopping with her mother:

I think when I was in middle school, I always, kind of, was very aware of, like, sizes and so she [my mother] would always be like "oh, grab all these sizes up"; and of course you know I was, kind of, whatever could fit, like, whatever size I could fit. Now I know that it's better to fit your body and it just doesn't really matter but, you know, then it was kind of it was a big deal.

It was also during puberty that the participants became interested in the opposite sex. This proved to be both helpful and harmful depending upon the interest, or lack of interest, shown by the participants' male counterparts. Hope described the impact of positive male attention:

If I found out a boy liked me, oh my goodness, as a fifth grader that was, you know, phenomenal for the self-confidence. It's pretty nice as a college student too.

Despite the frustration and confusion of puberty, the participants indicated that their body image did not preclude them from participating in all of life's activities. Hope summed this up concisely:

I had, for the most part, a positive body image. I was never one to be obsessed with other's acceptance of me; so I would say as far as, you know,

decisions or just any type of situation where peer pressure or any sort of like trying to look good in front of others never played a huge role in my life.

Major life decisions were not impacted by the participants' body image; but, as mentioned previously, each of the participants did undertake body projects as a result of their body image.

Body projects

The body is a consuming project for many women because it provides an important venue for announcing who they are to the world. When young girls, including the participants in this study, do not see themselves portrayed in the media's idealized images, they often engage in body projects to make themselves appear closer to the ideal image (Brumberg, 1997). Both men and women engage in body projects; however, it is primarily a female phenomenon (Ong, 2005). The body projects that were performed by the participants in this study included the use of makeup, food regulation, exercise, and clothing. The participants reported a higher use of body projects during middle and high school than they did during their time at the university. Hope explained this using humor in the following excerpt regarding the often rushed life of a university student: *"As a college student now, some days it's more just like roll out of bed and hope you're not half naked when you go to class."*

Each of the participants reported using makeup extensively during middle and high school as a result of the acne associated with puberty. The following excerpt from my interview with Hope represents a common theme among the participants:

Once I got acne in middle school, makeup was, like, an everyday thing. If you are being seen in public, you're putting it on. I wore makeup every single day from the start of sixth grade till my junior year of high school.

Makeup use diminished for each of the participants as they matured and their skin began to clear. At the time of their interviews, each of the participants had a clear complexion. They each reported feeling more comfortable with their skin when comparing themselves to their peers rather than the idealized images in the media.

In addition to makeup use, each of the participants reported using exercise to control their appearance and health. The range of exercise type and duration varied from Grace's one hour workouts, occurring five to six days a week, to Hope's *"random little online ab workouts or leg workouts maybe, like, once or twice every two weeks."* Fitness level impacted the participants' body image, with each participant reporting that their body-image satisfaction increased as their fitness level increased. The exercise regimens reported by the participants were used to firm and tone their bodies and to improve their health statuses. Isabelle summarized the sentiments of all participants, stating, *"I try and work out, not so much to lose weight or anything but, just to, like, to be healthier, live longer."* The participants reported a similar approach to diet. They reported controlling portion size in order to maintain the same clothing size and to maintain their health. None of the participants reported excessively restricted eating. Isabelle's following statement captured the eating habits of the participants. *"I try to watch what I eat or do portion control; but sometimes I do indulge."* Maintaining their current clothing size was important to all of the participants. Actually, clothing was generally reported to be very important to all of the participants.

All three participants enjoyed shopping and reported that having properly fitting clothing enhanced their positive body image. Each of the participants used clothing to enhance their appearance. All three participants reported using clothing to diminish the size

or appearance of body parts they did not like. Hope stated, *“I’m just trying to play down proportions I don’t like.”* A majority of the time, the participants reported dressing with care. A common theme of trying to downplay certain physical features was captured in the following excerpt from an interview with Hope: *“I’m, like, never throwing on baggy things or loose tops, trying to hide anything; it’s more just trying not to add any extra volume to my shape.”*

Themes

As discussed previously in this chapter, the identification of emergent themes, first across a single case and then through a careful comparison across multiple cases, was a key step in my analysis. Care was taken to reviews areas of convergence, divergence, commonality and nuance. When identifying themes attention was given to abstraction and subsumption as well as polarization and numeration (Smith et al., 2009). With careful consideration given to these areas, the following themes emerged.

1. Strong relationships with female relatives and peers
2. Media influence
3. Participation in organized athletics
4. Significant relationships with individuals with disabilities throughout life

The first two themes are not surprising, and are supported widely throughout literature. This will be discussed and cited in detail during the presentation of themes. Nevertheless, the participants’ understanding of media image manipulation and their ability to identify their body shape and size accurately among celebrity images was in direct contrast

to the findings reported in literature. The relationship between participation in athletics and a healthy body image was not expected but was supported in related literature.

Perhaps the most exciting theme that emerged during this study was the connection between a satisfied body image and having a significant relationship with at least one individual with a disability for a substantial period of time. The literature regarding this relationship was not found. I searched widely for related literature and even garnered the help of the lead research librarian at the institution where I am employed. I was able to find only a handful of related articles that focused on self-image and the relationship to a sibling with a disability. I was unable to find articles directly related to body image and relationships with individuals with disabilities. Additional articles addressing body image and individuals with disabilities focused on the person with the disability rather than the significant others in their lives.

Each of the identified themes is explored in detail in this chapter. Each theme is discussed as follows, with supporting literature and excerpts from the participants.

Relationships with female relatives and peers

According to Koro-Ljungberg and Hayes (2006) women in relationships construct roles and identities based upon their interactions with others. Additional studies have revealed that young women who are exposed to positive female role models through family members or peers early in development have lower levels of body-image dissatisfaction (Rubin et al., 2004; McGrath et al., 2010). The findings of my study are consistent with other research studies. Two participants, Isabelle and Hope, stated that their mothers and extended female relatives were positive role models, displaying satisfied body image. Hope

also shared that her mother was built very much like herself. She indicated that seeing her mother help her place perspective on her own appearance:

I'd be very hard on myself and then I would look at my mom; and then she had the same kind of body shape and so and I thought to myself "well you think she's beautiful and you think she has, you know, a great body – you have some of the same things." It's not like seeing a mirror but seeing someone else who practically has the same body as you and realizing that you think they're beautiful, like, it kind of helps me kind of have positive body image.

Grace and Isabelle said they had very close relationships with their mothers and extended female relatives who helped garner positive body image. They both reported being told many times by female relatives that they were beautiful.

Isabelle could not recall a time when any of her extended female relatives dieted or restricted their food intake. She admitted that she assumed they were all satisfied with their body image. Isabelle believed that the death of a close friend influenced her aunt's approach to body image. The young woman died from complications due to an eating disorder. She shared her aunt's struggle and resulting attitude in the following excerpt from our first interview:

Her [my aunt's] really close friends, their daughter died of an eating disorder; so, my aunt was very big into, like you know, just accept yourself for who you are and don't, um, don't give into what society thinks.

Numerous studies have linked dissatisfaction with body image to body-related teasing and criticism from peers and family members (Sanftner et al., 2009). Both Grace and Hope reported that family members had made comments about their bodies that impacted their body image. Despite her close relationship with her grandmother, Grace reported that her grandmother often made negative comments about her body, suggesting that she was getting chunky or looked pregnant in a photograph. She also indicated that her grandmother made

negative comments about the weight of individuals they encountered in public. This often confused and frustrated Grace as she reported that her grandmother was built like the rest of her female relatives, with *“thick tree-trunk”* legs. Grace shared that this did impact her confidence in her body. Hope could remember only one incident where a family member made a comment about her size. After a soccer game, Hope’s father told her, *“If you were ten pounds lighter, you could run so much faster down that field.”* Hope reported that this comment did not have a negative impact on her body image; however, she still remembered this comment which was made when she was in the fourth grade. Hope’s memory of this incident, I believe, did impact her more than she admitted, as she continued to remember the incident and felt strongly enough about the incident to discuss it during our interview. Hope also shared that her brother was very thin growing up. This was often a challenge for her. During the interview she confided that *“having a brother who was skinnier than you is not always something that is great for, you know a girl’s self-esteem.”* Hope indicated that the family of one of her friends had more of a negative impact on her body image than did her own. She summarized this impact during our first interview, as follows:

[A friend and her parents] dieted a lot and ... she would make comments; and she would, like, read health magazines; and so I think those ... different things I heard in the house, ... I would say they influenced me probably negatively; because all of the sudden, you start thinking about “oh you know they don’t like their bodies. They’re trying to change their bodies” so clearly, you know, if you have anything wrong, you need to be changing it.

In contrast, Isabelle reported that her family and friends provided positive role models for her. Isabelle remembered her father repeating the following advice to his daughters repeatedly, *“be confident with who you are, just be yourself. If a guy doesn’t like you for*

who you are, then he's not the right guy." She also shared the following statement regarding her friends:

Everybody is beautiful in their own way. Like, you know you don't need to be a certain size to fit in; and my friends have always, like, they accept me for who I am so I feel like I don't need to be skinny for them. And, any guy that I have liked, and has liked me, has liked me for how I am.

Hope discussed the positive influence of being surrounded by friends who shared a similar build:

I grew up with girls who had, like, thicker legs; and so, you know, when you're around people that are similar to you, usually you're not so self-conscious.

Each of the participants demonstrated an understanding of the role that heredity and genetics played in body shape and size. Grace shared a poignant story of looking through family photo albums after her grandmother's funeral. As she viewed photos of her female ancestry, she came to the conclusion that her pear-like shape was a direct result of her Czechoslovakian heritage. This perusal of family history was a turning point for her regarding her body:

I've kind of gotten to the point where, I don't want to say don't care but, I think, like I said, it's like I've done the best I can do you know. Granted my genes this is pretty frickin good right now, you know, like, this really isn't bad at all.

Grace's reaction to her genetic predisposition was similar to the experiences of the other participants, with each participant talking about their genetic inheritance and its implications regarding body size and shape.

Media influence

As indicated in the review of literature in Chapter 2, standards of beauty and attractiveness set forth by the media often contribute to a woman's satisfaction or dissatisfaction with her body. Miles (2009) noted that viewing images of the thin-ideal leads to body dissatisfaction, negative mood states, and symptoms of eating disorders. For women, images created and produced by the media play a large role in the development of identity and self-image. This held true for the women who participated in this research study. They reported significant media influence regarding makeup, clothing and body image. All three participants reported learning to apply makeup, select clothing, and even shave their legs from media sources. Luke (2010) noted that the images in teen magazines are more impactful on body image than the women in young girls' lives. When discussing the media, Grace indicated that she often felt as though she was an outsider: *"Sometimes, I feel like I'm not normal and skinny is."* Isabelle agreed, pointing specifically the use of undersized models and the impact this had on women, *"It's sad that somebody decides size six is a plus sized model."*

The participants in this study admitted turning to the media for advice regarding fashion and makeup and engaged in common body projects using this advice. Hope talked specifically about learning how to dress:

I did read a lot of magazines so you, obviously, have those articles as like how to dress for a pear shape, how to dress for this or that; so I definitely picked up on things.

While the media did influence body projects related to clothing and makeup, the participants most often were able to separate body projects related to fashion from body-

projects related to the actual body. Hope explained this well during one of our interview sessions:

Even though I loved magazines, I wouldn't say that was really, like, a huge influence. I never had that desire to be like stick skinny or anything like that. I've never, liked, taped up a picture on the fridge, or anything like that... to, like, work towards or, like, obsess over ... I guess for me, um, if I saw someone who was super petite, I just knew in my mind I was never going to be super petite. I guess, when I compare, I would compare and be, like, I would obviously notice the difference and be like "oh wow she has really skinny legs" but I never like sought out to, like, have those legs. I just kind of, over the years, became more content with my body.

Media education

I was surprised by the participants' understanding of the media's manipulation of images. Each participant demonstrated knowledge of the practices used by the media to present the ideal image to the public. Two of the participants, Grace and Isabelle, reported learning this through media sources, friends, or family. Hope reported that her school provided a great deal of education regarding the media and body image. In the following excerpt, she explained that her idea of beauty was influenced greatly by programming provided by her school:

Not becoming obsessed with, like, culture's depiction of, like, what is really beautiful was something [my school] always talked about; so I was kind of "oh yea that makes total sense how, you know, we're all different and, you know, just kind of to love the body you have."

Isabelle was concerned about the impact of the media and the ideal female image was having on young girls. She explained her feelings using the popular television show *Toddlers and Tiaras*:

It's like the beauty pageants ... like, Toddlers and Tiaras - I do watch the show. I do. It's a guilty pleasure but it just makes me sick, at the same time, to think, like, that those girls think that having all that caked on makeup and

just looking all Barbie dollish, they think that that's, just, real beauty and it's, like, no, that's not it at all.

Despite their understanding of media manipulation, the media did influence the participants' formation of the feminine ideal. Each of the participants shared that the media did influence their use of products and their idea the female image. Grace reported being fashion-conscious, but also frustrated with the women around her who appeared to make their fashion choices only based upon the media. She shared her frustration during one of our interview sessions:

So like these two girls are just sitting there and you can just tell, like, they've gotta have the logo showing and, like oh God, that just bothers me; and they have the Ugg boots on and then they have, like, the North Face jacket and, you know, the North Face backpack. It's like, "You know what? You don't have to have just North Face to be cool, hip, in or what have you. You can expand your brands, like, just because, you know, North Face is really popular right now doesn't mean ... that's the only thing you can wear." That kind of stuff just really bothers me.

Often, the participants were not aware of the influence the media had over their impression of the feminine ideal. Hope was attracted to men that were taller and larger than she. She was adamant that she would not want to date someone smaller than herself. When challenged to explain her stance, she seemed reluctant to admit that the media could exert such influence:

From the media and just what you take in growing up, you, kind of, always have that vision of like a man being bigger and, kind of, stronger and then, you know, the a small kind of dainty female; so that's probably where I got the idea of you need to be, you know, a little bit more petite especially as I, like, when you start upper elementary, you start getting interested in boys.

The participants' relationship with the media, and their understanding of doctored images and unrealistic expectations, was particularly visible during an exercise using celebrity images.

Celebrity comparison

I presented the participants with a series of celebrity photographs (Appendix C) during the first interview sessions and asked them the following questions regarding the photographs.

- Which women do you feel have the ideal body? Why?
- Are any of these images similar to your appearance?
- Are any of these images similar to how you would like to look?
- Do you believe it is possible for you to achieve that appearance?
- Which of the images is least similar to how you would like to look? Why?

From my review of literature, I expected the participants to select a thin ideal and to over-estimate their own size. The actual findings were somewhat surprising. When asked about the ideal body, each of the participants focused on celebrities that looked, in the words of the participants, “real, healthy, and happy.” Isabelle captured the sentiments of the participants when she proclaimed:

I just think, like, the bodies that I starred are more realistic to, like, every day people and ordinary people; and not everybody has a personal trainer or chef, or whatever, to cook them meals ... They look healthy and they look they look very confident and they look happy.

When describing the bodies of the celebrities they would least like to resemble the participants used the following words, “skinny, toothpick, heavy, fuller, and unhealthy.” The participants all spoke more negatively about excessively thin stars than those who were obese.

Perhaps the most surprising responses, when compared to what was reported in previous research, the participants each had a realistic appraisal of their own shape and size.

When asked to select the images that were most similar to their own appearance, the participants all selected those who were very close to their size and shape. In addition, when asked to select those images that depicted how they would like to look, the participants select those celebrities who were very similar to their current body shape and size. As indicated in the review of literature, this finding was not consistent with literature addressing body image in traditional college aged women.

Baugh and colleagues (2010) posited that women were more likely to perceive themselves as being more overweight than they actually were. Additionally, Brylinsky (1990) noted that, “50 percent to 70 percent of college female students misperceive their weight-related appearance, consistently overestimating their body size eighteen percent more often than men” (p. 2). Research findings by Gillen and Lefkowitz (2011) revealed that the best predictor of body image and self-esteem is the discrepancy between perceptions of an individual’s own body size, and the body size individuals believe the other sex sees as ideal. This construct is important for college students, as they spend extensive time with peers in academic, social, living, and working environments. When women feel their actual size does not compare positively with the ideal size constructed by others, their body image and self-esteem suffer (Gillen & Lefkowitz, 2011).

The participants in this study demonstrated realistic views of their ability, or inability, to achieve the appearance of celebrities. Isabelle again turned to her knowledge of media manipulation to explain why she would not be able to consistently achieve a celebrity look:

Usually I know that, like, they have a makeup crew and hair people to do their makeup to make them look that good; so I’m usually, like hey, I know that you probably don’t look like that on a daily basis. When you look at a magazine or like a photo shoot and you go, like, you had people to help you look that

good, pick out your clothes and you're probably a little bit air-brushed in there too.

The findings surrounding the participants' response to the media and the impact of media education do not support previous literature. This will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5 along with two additional unexpected findings regarding significant relationships with individuals with disabilities and involvement in athletics.

Participation in athletics

"I think a big part of my body image story is surrounding sports." [Hope]

As I completed my research, two unexpected themes emerged. The first unexpected theme—the impact of participation in athletics on female body image—emerged from a single case, Hope. Hope believed that participation on athletic teams greatly influenced her body image. Through athletics, she came to see her body, including its shape and size, as a means to accomplish what was necessary on the field or court. While the media, and sometimes her peers, valued smaller, thinner and more petite women, coaches viewed Hope's larger size as a benefit. Her height and larger legs meant strength and speed on the soccer field. The following excerpt reflects Hope's belief about the positive impact of athletics:

I think playing sports was huge. I think just because it not only keeps you in shape; but, just for me, I didn't mind being a little bit stronger a little more athletic build. They [my legs] are a little thicker because it helped me, you know, on the soccer field or the basketball court or this or that; so I think having a purpose to my build kind of helped me.

Participating in sports also desensitized Hope to seeing other female bodies in the locker room. Hope soon realized that nobody and no body were perfect, and that many young women on her team were similar in size and build to her. She discussed having a unique relationship with her body because of using it to perform, as well as being required to

shower and change in locker rooms, as is reported in the following excerpt from one of our interview sessions:

I think you just naturally become more comfortable with it [your body] because you're using it more and changing in locker rooms. You just kind of you don't care anymore.

The influence of athletics could also be seen in Hope's use of language. In a diary excerpt, provided by Hope, from her middle school years, the influence of athletics was apparent:

Your body might not be a size 2, or six for that matter, but you need those gorgeous legs to play soccer and if a guy only likes you for your appearance, he isn't worth it.

When describing her body, or the ideal body, Hope used the following words often attributed to athletes—toned, healthy, satisfied, active, muscular, and athletic.

The role of athletics in the development of body image has been explored by a number of researchers and, therefore, should not have come as a surprise. There is a positive link between participation in athletics and the self-esteem of young women (Marsh & Jackson, 1986; Marsh & Kleitman, 2003). Greenleaf, Boyer, and Petrie (2009) reviewed several theoretical models that predicted participation in athletics in high school would have a positive influence on young women's body image. They determined that the physical requirements of athletics, including strength, speed, agility, flexibility, and coordination, allowed for an appreciation of the body's functionality (Greenleaf et al.). In the current study, Hope reported a similar experience. "Learning what one's body can do and valuing the accomplishments that follow, as opposed to simply relying on how one looks, may enhance and expand girls' and young women's body image and sense of physical competence" (Avalos, Tylka, & Wood-Barcalow, 2005, p. 715).

Hausenblas and Fallon (2006) expanded on the relationship between activity and body image by including physical activity that occurred outside the realm of athletics. Their findings supported the notion that body image was improved by any kind of consistent physical activity. These findings are of particular interest when considering the body image of college-aged women. All three participants in my study reported feelings of satisfaction with their bodies when they exercised or toned their bodies. Richman and Shaffer (2000) investigated the relationship between participation in athletics prior to college enrollment and the self-esteem of traditional-aged college women. Their findings revealed there is a positive relationship between feeling physically competent and having a positive body image.

In the current study, Grace reported a similar feeling of competence when she began to exercise on a regular basis. Grace had the most physical activity among the group, approximately one hour per day. Both Hope and Isabelle reported exercising when they began to feel that their clothing did not fit properly. Only one participant (Hope) indicated that she continued to play soccer, but only on a club team. In addition to the supporting literature, the findings from my study suggest that participation in athletics or consistent physical activity may protect college-age women from dissatisfied body image. The role that participation in athletics plays in the way women make meaning of their body image will be discussed further in Chapter 5.

Relationships with individuals with a disability

The second unexpected and exciting finding was identified through a careful comparison across multiple cases. As I coded data from interview transcripts, I noted that each of the participants interacted with individuals with disabilities in significant ways. The

young women participating in this study had a fairly good body image. Additionally, each of the participants had at least one significant relationship with an individual with a disability.

Grace reported having a brother with learning disabilities, an aunt with intellectual disabilities, and an aunt who died at a young age of heart disease. Grace, herself, was recently diagnosed as having learning disabilities. She had a very close relationship with her mother and grandmother and, as a result, visited her intellectually challenged aunt on a weekly basis. Often these visits were challenging for Grace as her aunt's appearance and behavior often drew unwanted attention. This became especially difficult for Grace as she entered puberty and became attracted to the opposite sex:

Around the sixth, seventh grade, that's kind of, like, the whole "boy time" so I remember that was really hard for me to be with my aunt because everyone stared.

The unwanted attention was challenging for Grace; however, she was pragmatic about those who chose to stare at her aunt, stating, *"We all just kind of stare at something that's different and not normal in society."* She added, *"I'm sure people were staring because like, oh she looks and sounds kind of funny; but that was really hard for me, like, growing up."*

Amid the stares, Grace formulated her own body image. She credited her relationship with her aunt with helping to develop her autonomy and ability to discount the negative reactions of others. When asked how her relationship with her aunt influenced her body image, Grace stated, *"I know that it made a big difference, a big impact in my life to just not care what people think."*

Isabelle reported having a *"really close friend"* throughout elementary and middle school, who was diagnosed with autism. Isabelle stated that she did not really think of her friend as *"disabled."* She stated that her friend *"liked the same things that we all did. She*

liked to have fun.” Initially, Isabelle did not believe her friend’s disability impacted her body image; however, after consideration, she indicated that she did observe a connection.

Isabelle shared the following during our final interview:

She influenced me to become a special education teacher, but not my body image. [Pause] Okay. It influenced my body image, probably, just a little bit because like she looks normal on the outside but she’s just like her brain just didn’t work the same way.

Isabelle also reported that her sister had a lisp during her childhood. She remembered that she was taught by her parents and family members to respect people for “*who they were*” and not what they looked like or what they could or could not do. She expressed this when talking about her sister’s early speech difficulties:

I was raised that everybody is, you know, unique in their own ways; but that doesn’t make them any less important or special or anything like that. So, my sister grew up, she had a lisp. She was perfectly fine, like, there’s nothing wrong with her. She just had a little trouble saying her S’s and R’s.

Isabelle also shared that she had a grandmother who died from complications of diabetes, and a family friend whose death was caused by complications of an eating disorder. Both of these relationships influenced Isabelle to care for her health and to have a healthy view of weight control.

When asked if her relationship with individuals with disabilities impacted her body image, Isabelle responded that it had little or no impact. However, her language depicted otherwise. She discussed being accepting of others for who they were rather than for how they looked or acted. She also shared that she often did not think of people as disabled; they were simply different and “*it wasn’t a big deal.*” Early exposure to individuals with disabilities may have helped Elizabeth to develop an acceptance of others’ differences, both

in ability and appearance. Perhaps this acceptance may have extended to her own body. This will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5.

My interview with Hope regarding her interaction with individuals with disabilities was particularly interesting. She described coaching a basketball team of young boys, several of whom had a diagnosis of autism. She mentioned participating in theater productions and having several encounters with a woman who had no legs. Hope also described bi-monthly visits with a family friend whose daughter was diagnosed with bipolar disorder. This young lady was the same age as Hope; and, in recalling their visits, Hope described several interactions that were unpredictable, including physical outbursts and tantrums. Throughout her description of these interactions, Hope used language that was accepting of the disability and difference.

Initially, Hope reported that the aforementioned encounters were her only interactions with individuals with disabilities. As the interview continued, she mentioned in a very off-hand way that her father was diagnosed with Stihl's disease and had rheumatoid arthritis, which had resulted in numerous spinal surgeries. She commented that there were always countless medications around the house. Interestingly, she did not perceive her father as having a disability. When asked about individuals with disabilities, Hope replied, *"Disability was never really made a big deal, like, either, you know, from my parents or my friends or my family."* Hope also mentioned that disabilities were never discussed in her family. She reported disabilities were not seen as *"bad or good;"* they just were disabilities.

The participants' interactions with individuals with disabilities may have influenced their body-image perception. When asked about how the impact of knowing someone with a disability may have influenced their behavior, the participants answered similarly. The

following excerpt from an interview with Hope summarized their responses: *“I don't judge somebody based on how they look or how like the first like ten seconds of meeting them.”*

When asked directly about the implication of their relationship with individuals with disabilities on their body image, the participants often failed to make a connection; however, throughout their interviews their language was very accepting of the flaws in themselves and others. The literature supports the notion that having a family member or significant other with a disability may positively influence adaptability and acceptance. According to Dykens (2004), mothers and siblings of children with disabilities have a higher level of self-acceptance, including a positive attitude toward themselves and acceptance of both good and bad qualities. Furthermore, siblings of individuals with disabilities have positive relationships with others and the sense of realizing their own potential (Dykens).

In a 1994 study investigating locus of control, Burton and Parks (1994) found that college-age siblings of individuals with disabilities demonstrated a higher internal locus of control when compared with their peers. This may help explain the participants' unexpected response to the impact of the media on their body image. Rather than blaming the media for their own perceptions, they believed they had control of their own body and their image of that body.

A thorough review of literature, with the assistance of the head research librarian at the institution where I work, resulted in a dearth of literature related to significant relationships with individuals with disabilities and the impact of those relationships on body image. There were several works related to individuals with disabilities and body image but none related to the significant others surrounding the person with a disability. This finding will be addressed in greater detail in Chapter 5.

Summary

My study was designed to explore how young women come to understand body image and how college women make meaning of their own body image in the college environment. Through a thorough analysis of data, themes emerged that provided insight regarding how the three participants in the study made sense or meaning of the phenomenon of body image in the college environment. Four key themes were identified:

1. Relationships with female relatives and peers influenced the development of body image in the participants of this study.
2. The media did impact the participant's approach to how they dressed and applied makeup; however, because of media education, the participants were able to distinguish between reality and media manipulation.
3. Participation in athletics played a key role in body-image development and meaning for Hope. She developed her body image based upon what her body was capable of doing as related to her size and strength.
4. The participants all reported significant relationships with persons with disabilities throughout a substantial portion of their lives. These relationships appeared to have helped the participants to develop a sense of acceptance of their own bodies based upon an altered view of perfection.

CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION

This final chapter provides a discussion of the research findings and the implications of those findings. The chapter includes: (a) a brief summary of my research and methodological approach; (b) a discussion of discoveries that led to changes or clarifications in my research approach; (c) a discussion of research findings and how those findings aided in answering my original research questions; (d) a discussion of implications for policy and practice within higher education and student affairs; (e) a discussion of how this research study contributes to existing literature and implications for further research; and (f) my personal reflections on this research process and experience and its implications on my future research.

Summary of Research and Methodology

As outlined in Chapter 3, the purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how young women come to understand body image and make meaning of their own body image. The intent of this study was to examine the relationship between body-image perception, protective factors, and the college experience. My goal was to answer the following research questions: (1) How do college women come to understand body image? and (2) How do college women make meaning of their own body image in the college environment?

Theoretical framework and perspective

This interpretive phenomenological study was based on constructionist epistemology; the premise was that young women and girls construct their reality based upon their interactions with society (Crotty, 1998). I found that Interpretive Phenomenological analysis (IPA) was well suited for researching issues surrounding body image as IPA was particularly

interested in how individuals made sense of their major life experiences (Smith et al., 2009). By employing IPA methods, I was able to interpret what participants told me about their lived experience as they attempted to make sense of it. During data analysis, careful attention was given to the common and disparate experiences surrounding major transitions in the participants' lives. Additionally, each of the young women was observed as a unique person with a unique story that set her apart from others; therefore, using IPA, each case was examined individually and as a part of the whole. Finally, staying true to IPA methodology, the language used by participants was analyzed and used to interpret the phenomenon being studied—body image.

A feminist theoretical perspective was used to guide the research and analyze data. I selected this perspective to understand how young women interpret the meaning of the world around them and determine a sense of self and body image, specifically through their interactions with others. Feminist theory proved to be a suitable lens through which to examine body image. When trying to make sense of the way young women make meaning of body image, it was important to understand that they lived in a cultural context that associated femininity with thinness and thinness with success (Leavy, Gnon & Ross, 2009).

Five common concepts identified in feminist social science were used to guide this study: (a) the social construction of gender; (b) the use of feminist theory to explore the tensions and contradictions of women's lives and their personal narratives including methods for interpreting and deconstructing narrative data; (c) the importance exploring conflict in the context of the research question; (d) the use of critical self-reflection on the part of the researcher; and (e) the focus on the importance of the researcher-participant relationship (Bloom, 1998).

Research design

This qualitative, interpretive phenomenological study, with a constructionist epistemology, used semi-structured in-depth interviews. Three interviews were scheduled with a few essential guiding questions and topics; and participants were encouraged to elaborate and help guide the interviews. The first interview focused on life-history, the second on details of the experience, and the final on reflection on meaning (Seidman, 2006). This enabled each participant's perspective on body image to be articulated and uncovered as the individual experienced it.

Data-analysis process

As stated previously, the focus of interpretive phenomenological analysis is on the participants' attempt to make sense of their experiences surrounding a particular phenomenon, in this case, body image in the college environment (Smith et al., 2009). In order to accomplish this task I undertook an iterative and inductive analysis process. The following steps were used to analyze data: (1) transcripts were read and re-read, while listening to audio recordings of the interviews, to capture and note nuances of language, tone, and pauses; (2) a close, line-by-line analysis of the experiences, concerns and understandings of the participants was completed with special attention given to the participants' use of language; (3) emergent themes were identified first across a single case and then through a careful comparison across multiple cases; (4) identified themes were analyzed and an interpretive account of what this might mean was developed; (5) an emerging model was developed to illustrate the relationship between identified themes and research questions; (6) findings were shared with participants for member checking and peers for review; and (7) I

reflected on my own process and perceptions regarding the phenomenon being experienced by the participants.

Methodological Discoveries

Two methodological discoveries were made during my research. The first appeared during recruitment of the participants and the other during coding. In my plan for recruiting participants, I decided to use purposeful sampling with a narrow demographic. This decision proved to be beneficial to my research, but did not come without challenges. Purposeful sampling allowed for the selection a homogenous group of participants, which diminished possible influences from differences in demographics and strengthened my findings. This type of sampling, however, did prove to be time consuming and yielded a smaller sample from which to select participants.

During the interview process, one participant disclosed that she was from a small town located in a neighboring state, thus challenging the research design. The participant fit all other participant criteria and shared a number of similarities with other participants. Additionally, the small town she identified as home possessed common characteristics as compared with the home towns of other participants. After reviewing the common characteristics of this participant and revisiting the original intent of the research design to obtain a homogeneous sample, I made the decision, in consultation with my committee chair, to retain all three original participants. I believe the use of a homogenous sample added to the authenticity of my findings.

The second discovery occurred during the coding process. When coding data, my original plan was to conduct the initial coding using the “mark-up” feature in Microsoft

Word. Although I began my coding in this way, I quickly discovered that it impeded the free flow of thought for me. The use of technology stilted my willingness to jot down every thought that occurred while reviewing the interview transcripts. I found that working with the original manuscript enabled me to note nuances in language, comment on interesting juxtapositions, identify and distinguish links between sections, and write questions to myself to encourage a deeper analysis of a section of text. However, I did use technology to complete thematic coding. Additionally, during the open-coding process, I discovered that a careful analysis of the use of language, including pauses and laughter, provided for a deeper and often slightly different understanding of the transcript.

Summary of Findings and Discussion of Themes

I came to realize the lofty nature of the goal of my research—to understand how young women come to understand body image and make meaning of their own body image in college environment. How does one capture how women “make meaning” of body image? As I progressed through the coding and analysis using interpretive phenomenological analysis, I began to wonder how I could most effectively and with the greatest success capture the process my participants used to make meaning of their body image. It became apparent that “meaning making” was not a simple and straightforward process. The process was multifaceted and differed for each participant. However, as themes emerged, a pattern began to take shape for Grace, Isabelle and Hope, as they experienced the phenomenon of body image in the college environment. The challenge became how best to present the findings. Eventually, a possible framework or structural model emerged (Figure 1).

To understand the emerging model, one must begin at the base, with each element adding to the formation of meaning. In the first element, a young girl is born with a specific genetic makeup that determines her basic shape and bone structure. During the years before puberty, a young girl has limited awareness of her body differences, focusing on her body only when her body limits what she is able to do. She becomes more aware of her body during puberty and begins to view herself and others through this new body awareness. As the young girl attempts to make meaning of the changes she is experiencing she turns to the significant women in her life—her female relatives and peers. These relationships can have both a positive or negative impact on the young woman's body image, depending upon the messages and examples being modeled through these relationships.

In addition to the influence of female role models, this young woman is also impacted by a number of factors. For the young women participating in this study, the key areas of influence were the media, participation in athletics, and relationships with people with disabilities. All of these factors combine to help form a young woman's body image and self-concept. Based upon this body image, the young woman undertakes body projects to appear closer to her ideal image. These body projects, in turn, influence the young woman's body image, thus creating a repeating cycle between body image and body projects. It is through body projects and a compilation of preceding factors that the young woman makes meaning of her body image in the college environment. This emerging model was used to make meaning of my findings, first in relationship to emergent themes and then in relationship to the research questions.

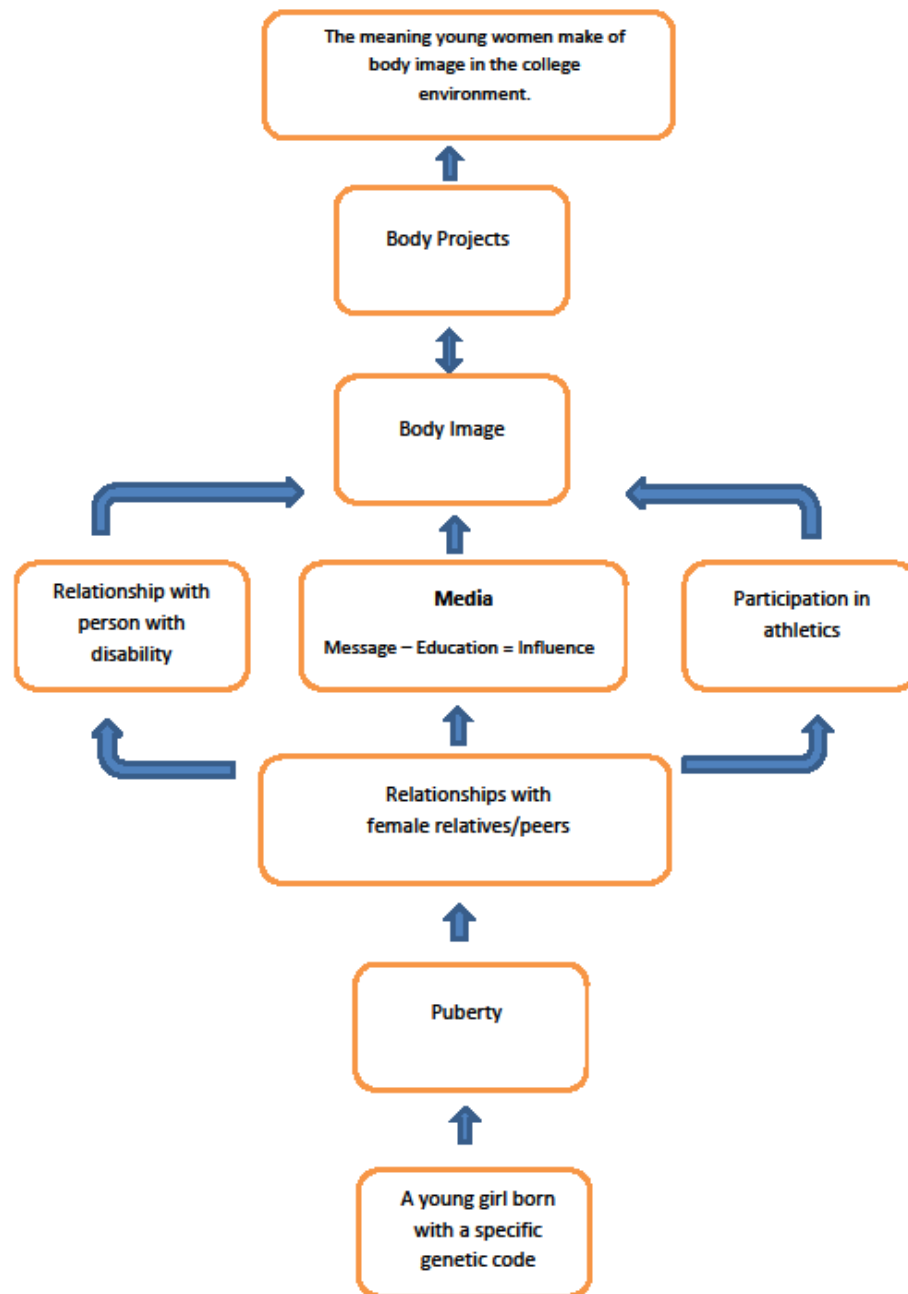


Figure 1. Emerging model of body image making in the college environment

The discussion of themes focuses on the four identified themes: (a) relationships with female relatives and peers, (b) media influence, (c) participation in athletics, and (d) relationships with individuals with disabilities. These themes will be discussed as they relate to the original research questions: (1) How do college-age women come to understand body image? and (2) How do college-age women make meaning of their own body image in the college environment? These findings will also be compared with the existing literature.

Relationships with female relatives and peers

According to Koro-Ljungberg and Hayes (2006), women in relationships construct roles and identities based upon their interactions with others. Additional studies have revealed that young women who are exposed to positive female role models through family members or peers early in development have lower levels of body-image dissatisfaction (McGrath et al., 2010; Rubin et al., 2004). As discussed in Chapter 4, the findings of my study are consistent with previously reported research.

Knightly and Whitelock (2007) proposed that people draw upon two sources to determine their value. First, individuals make cognitive comparisons between what they actually achieve and what they would like to achieve. Second, “judgments of worth derive from social interactions and the feedback received from significant others” (p. 18).

Accordingly, self-esteem and body image are both individually and socially constructed. The nuclear family, and particularly mothers play a crucial role in body-image development in young women. In *The body project: An intimate history of American girls*, Brumberg (1998) lamented the decline of maternal interaction and supervision of girls over the past century. She argued that mothers, in particular, and female relatives and friends, in general, are

instrumental in helping a young woman make meaning of her body and the changes that take place during puberty.

My findings both support and contradict Brumberg's (1998) arguments. The participants in my research reported close and open relationships with their female relatives, thus contradicting Brumberg's findings, which indicated a distancing of mother/daughter relationships. Two participants, Grace and Isabelle, defined these relationships as instrumental in the development of their body image, supporting the work of Brumberg. Leavy, Gnong, and Ross (2009) agreed with Brumberg, that "girls often learn how to do gender from their mothers" (p. 266), which is supportive of my findings. Mothers and female relatives unconsciously teach their daughters how to approach gender and body image. When discussing findings regarding the implications of mother/daughter relationships, it is important to consider that mothers are also socialized in the context of the media and cultural norms (Leavy et al.). Female relatives do influence how young women make meaning of their body image; however, they are not alone in their influence.

Our cultural milieu and affiliations impact how we view ourselves and others (Koro-Ljungberg & Hayes, 2006); therefore, peers play a large role in the social construction of self-esteem and body image. Numerous studies have linked dissatisfaction with body image to body-related teasing and criticism from peers and family members (Sanftner et al., 2009). The findings suggest that close friends and the encounters we have with them may have an influence on our body image and self-image, and the behavior we exhibit (Harring, Montgomery, & Hardin, 2010). Understanding that friends have an impact on self-image and decision-making, young women are most affected by this reality, as they report the greatest amount of connection with friends (Sanftner et al., 2009). The results of my study support

the notion that peers influence young women's body image; however these peers are not always friends. The young women in my study compared themselves to all women surrounding them, regardless of their relationship with the women.

There is evidence that the pressure for peer conformity in adolescent girls may make them more self-conscious and cause them to reinterpret theories about themselves (Brylinsky, 1990). Often the pressure to conform to the ideal image set forth by peers superseded the positive influence of female relatives. While peers did play a part in how my participants interpreted their own body image, it was not always in a negative or conforming way. Hope reported that, when she compared herself to her female peers rather than images in the media, she developed more body confidence.

Female role models, especially during adolescence, influenced how the participants came to understand body image. The participants developed a positive sense of who they were through female role models, and who were comfortable with their own bodies as well as women who provided positive reinforcement of the young woman's character and body composition. The participants carried these messages with them into the college setting and used them to interpret their body image in this new environment. I believe the foundation of confidence, developed through early interactions with positive female role models, helped the young women navigate the process of making meaning of their own body image in the college environment. As the women attempted to make meaning of their body image, they continued to process new experiences through the knowledge and experience they had as adolescents.

Beginning during puberty and continuing forward, women are exposed to the pedagogies of everyday life that play a part in identity politics (Luke, 2010). These

pedagogies of everyday life are a product of a “network of historical, political, sociocultural, and knowledge relations” (Luke, p. 130). For women, images created and produced by the media play a large role in the development of identity and self-image. The images in teen magazines are more impactful than all the lessons on feminism provided by the women in girls’ lives (Luke, p. 136)

Media influence

The standards of beauty and attractiveness set forth by the media often contribute to a woman’s satisfaction or dissatisfaction with her body. Miles (2009) posited that “viewing images of the thin-ideal caused an increase in body dissatisfaction, negative mood states, and eating disorder symptoms” (p. 5). According to Miles, women react to media imaging in one of two ways: they attempt to achieve the ideal standard of beauty, or they see the ideal as unattainable and choose to abandon a healthy lifestyle completely. My findings did not support Miles’ work. While voracious consumers of the media, especially fashion magazines, my participants were not tempted to strive to achieve the ideal standard of beauty depicted in the media; nor did they abandon a healthy lifestyle. Instead, they were able to separate the presented images from what was realistically achievable. This media awareness appeared to be the result of intentional education provided to the participants. All three participants reported receiving education regarding the media’s manipulation of female images—Grace and Isabelle, through media sources, and Hope through educational programming at her school. Feminist writers were some of the first to draw attention to the way in which the media influenced body image.

In the 1970s, feminist writers began to draw attention to the ways in which women regulate their own bodies in response to societal norms (Bordo, 1993). Feminists took note of the ever-increasing drive for women to participate in regimes of dieting, makeup, hair straightening or curling, dress, exercise, and cosmetic surgery. Dworkin (1974) remarked, “In our culture not one part of a women’s body is left untouched, unaltered ... From head to toe, every feature of a woman's face, every section of her body, is subject to modification” (pp. 113–114). Butler (2004) believed these body projects are an attempt to respond to the social scripts that are prescribed for us. These gendered performances reflect how we feel about ourselves and how we feel about how others react in relation to us.

In response, academic and public debates have appeared about the political and moral ramifications of “mass-media advertising, consumption and the objectification of women” (Luke, 2010, p. 131); however, these debates have not spurred change. Objectifying and stereotypical images of women communicated by the media problematize negative stereotypes. Because of the powerful visual imaging of advertising, a counter message needs to be created that questions the validity of the media’s portrayal of women. “We need to scrutinize and challenge pedagogical strategies that fool us into thinking real beings are less desirable than things unreal” (Luke). Giroux (2000) stated that exploring the idea of public pedagogy in visual culture “is crucial to raising broader questions about how notions of difference, civic responsibility, community and belonging are produced” (p. 352). In the *Handbook of public pedagogy: Education and learning beyond schooling* (2010), Tavin agreed “visual qualities, as perceived, exert their force on personal and social experiences in everyday life” (p. 435).

After being exposed to negative messaging through the media, it is not surprising many women are not satisfied with their bodies (Garner, 1997). Despite the media's influence, all of the young women who participated in this study had an accurate appearance comparison when completing the celebrity body-image exercise (Appendix C) and a low negative comparison during the exercise. These positive results may be associated with the media education that each of the participants received.

A variety of approaches to media education or intervention have been discussed in literature. Some have suggested that young women should be educated about the measures advertisers take to alter images in order to shatter the illusion of perfection (Levine & Piron 2004). Others have suggested that using average-sized models, in exchange for the ultra-thin models that are the current norm, may improve women's perceptions of themselves (Pinhas, Toner, Ali, Garfinkel, & Suckless, 1999). Haas, Pawlow, Pettibone and Segrist (2012) conducted a study to determine the effectiveness of media education in increasing women's satisfaction with their own bodies. They determined that informing women about the alterations of images in the media, and about the average woman's appearance, may have had a positive effect on the women's body image. This appeared to be the case with the young women in my study. In addition to media education, athletics and physical activity may also protect young women from dissatisfied body image.

Participation in athletics

Sports provide opportunities for young women to feel good about their bodies and to acquire the skills to be assertive, independent and in control of their own bodies (Greenleaf, Boyer & Petrie, 2009). The participants in my study did not participate in collegiate

athletics; therefore, I did not expect participation in athletics to develop as a theme. Surprisingly, despite their lack of participation in collegiate sports, the participants in my study reported a positive connection between athletics or physical activity and their body image—especially Hope. The young women reported that the more physically fit they felt they were, the better their body image. Hope also reported that participation in athletics helped her view her body as a tool that enabled her to perform. She also gauged her body size and shape based upon the strength it provided. Richman and Shaffer (2000) posited that this ability—to view your body as a tool allowing one to accomplish tasks—helps young women develop a positive body image. Similar to the young women in my study, the women in their study reported higher self-esteem and greater overall well-being.

Greenleaf, Boyer, and Petrie (2009) revealed that higher levels of physical activity in college are associated with feeling strong, physically fit, and coordinated. Additionally, a higher level of physical activity is linked to being independent and intrinsically motivated. While participation in sports or physical activity appeared to play a part in developing positive psychological states regarding body image, their findings suggested that participation in these activities, in and of itself, might not be enough. Instead, these outcomes might only be achieved when paired with positive messaging about body image (Greenleaf et al.). The environment created by coaches, parents and peers may have a strong influence on body-image development.

Smith et al. (2007) found that positive messaging from coaches and parents regarding skill development and having fun while participating in athletics led to more positive experiences, less anxiety and enhanced self-esteem. Conversely, Muscat and Long (2008) noted that athletes reported greater disordered eating patterns when recalling critical

comments by coaches or family members related to body shape or weight. Elite athletes, especially those competing in sports that emphasize thinness are at greatest risk of developing disordered eating (Steinfeldt, Carter, Zakrajsek, & Steinfeldt, 2011). If the environment surrounding participation in athletics plays a crucial role in self-image development, then athletic programs should be carefully and purposefully developed to ensure that coaches and parents are educated to create an environment that promotes fun and competence (Greenleaf et al., 2009). Additionally, college workout facilities and wellness centers should be purposefully designed and managed in order to provide a safe and encouraging environment for all who chose to participate, including those with disabilities.

Relationships with individuals with disabilities

My findings indicated a positive connection between body image and consistent exposure, at a young age, to individuals with disabilities. Each of my participants claimed a positive body image and reported having a significant relationship with an individual with a disability during her developmental years. This finding was completely unexpected; therefore, I searched for literature addressing the subject only to discover there is limited literature directly related to the topic. Existing literature addressed self-concept but not body image. Because of the dearth of literature in this area, the relationship between these factors requires additional investigation.

I proposed that early exposure to individuals with disabilities helped to develop an acceptance of others differences, both in ability and appearance; and, in extension, perhaps this acceptance extended to the participants' own bodies. The literature supports the notion that having a family member or significant other with a disability may positively influence

adaptability and acceptance. According to Dykens (2004), mothers and siblings of children with disabilities have a higher level of self-acceptance, including a positive attitude toward themselves and acceptance of both good and bad qualities. Furthermore, siblings of individuals with disabilities have positive relationships with others and the sense of realizing their own potential (Dykens).

In a study investigating locus of control, Burton and Parks (1994) found that college-age siblings of individuals with disabilities demonstrated a higher internal locus of control when compared with their peers. This may help explain the participants' unexpected response to the impact of the media on their body image. Rather than blaming the media for their own perceptions, they believed they had control of their own body and their image of it.

An additional consideration that must be examined is the possibility of an altered view of the idea of perfection. While many adolescents form their ideas of physical perfection based upon the media, adolescents who are exposed to individuals with disabilities understand the disparity of the idea of perfection. The participants in my study demonstrated a wide acceptance of body shapes and sizes as ideal. Exposure to individual with disabilities may help explain the participants' responses to the celebrity comparison exercise. My participants focused on the photographed individual's apparent happiness as a measure of the ideal image. The focus on health and happiness as a measure of attractiveness may have been influenced by an altered sense of perfection.

Feminist theory supports the linkages in understanding this finding. Wendell (1989) argued that the oppression of individuals with disabilities is closely linked to the cultural and social oppression of the body. She posited that the American culture idealizes the body and demands that we control it. Without an understanding of individuals with disabilities, the

idea of bodily perfection is allowed to exist. Wendell (1989) stated, “If disabled people and their knowledge were fully integrated into society, everyone's relation to her/his real body would be liberated” (p. 104).

While this finding is exciting, it is important to remember the goal of my research was to make sense of how my participants made meaning of body image in their particular environment. Caution should be used when generalizing these findings to include other young women. Additional research is warranted regarding the correlation between body image and significant relationships with individuals with disabilities.

Strengths and Limitations

During the scope of my research, I used great care to ensure the trustworthiness and goodness of the study and resulting findings. To ensure the validity of the study, sensitivity to context was considered (Merriam, 2002). This included an awareness of existing literature; carefully crafted and conducted interviews; the use of verbatim extracts to ensure that voice was given to participants; and a general avoidance of generalized claims (Smith et al., 2009). Internal validity was ensured through triangulation, member checks and peer review/debriefing. Triangulation of this study was accomplished in several ways. I conducted multiple interviews with the three participants, which enabled me to collect data from a variety of perspectives. Field notes and journals kept during the research phase of the study provided supplemental data and were used as a resource during data analysis. Additionally, artifacts collected during interviews were considered during data analysis. These artifacts included photographs and journals volunteered by participants, screening surveys, and celebrity comparison results.

Member checking was used to determine the accuracy of my research findings. Participants were asked to review transcripts of their interviews; corrections, changes, and/or deletions were invited and incorporated into the final transcripts. Additionally, I presented themes, case analysis, and portions of the final product to the participants to ensure the findings were accurate. Peer review/debriefing was used to enhance the accuracy of the research. Peers reviewed materials at three points throughout the research. They reviewed transcripts, findings, and the discussion of the findings. I maintained a clear audit trail and clearly stated my positionality to ensure reliability within this study.

Despite all attempts to maintain the goodness and trustworthiness of my research, it is important to consider the limitations of the study. The first limitation was in the scope and size of the study. This study was limited to three participants who were white, middle-class, elementary education majors at a Midwestern university; therefore, this study does not attempt to give voice to differing demographics in diverse settings. Because the goal of interpretive phenomenological analysis is to investigate the lived experience of a small homogenous sample in a specific situation, this might also be considered a strength of the study. It was my perception that the rich descriptive and interpretive data provided may provide significant evidence to interpret the experiences of these young women, and that their experience might aid others to understand the phenomenon of body-image development in other young women.

The second limitation of this study was the use of semi-structured qualitative interviews involving unstructured and open-ended questions intended to elicit information, views and opinions from participants. The findings of this study were limited in four key ways as a result of this approach. In qualitative interviews, the participants provided their

interpretations of events that were filtered through their own views and therefore may have been biased or based upon inaccurate memories. The setting of the interview was not a natural setting and may have influenced responses; and the presence of the researcher may also have biased responses. Additionally, in employing a semi-structured interview approach, there were most certainly unasked questions. The use of triangulation assisted with mitigating this limitation, as well as the use of artifacts such as surveys, celebrity comparison exercise results, and journal entries volunteered by the participants.

One strength of this study was the willingness of the participants to openly share their experience as it related to body image. This open participation enabled me, as the researcher, to give voice to these young women as they attempted to make meaning of body image in the college environment.

A second strength was the feminist qualitative nature of the study. There is a wide breadth of literature discussing traditional college-age women and body image, but little understanding of what body image means for young women as they navigate the college environment. This study provided a glimpse into the lives of these three young women as they discussed how they made meaning of body image in the college environment. The study demonstrated how body image was both individually and socially constructed. The women also shared the tensions and contradictions they experienced as they navigated body image as gendered individuals.

Implications for Policy and Practice

I undertook this study with the hope that the results would influence the practice of college offices dealing with young women who may have a dissatisfied body image. While a

large body of research has been conducted regarding body image, the majority has been quantitative. While quantitative findings may provide college administrators with valuable aggregate data regarding the impact of negative body image, the “why” and “how” question is not satisfied. Therefore, administrators who rely on such data miss vital information that could assist with policy development and practice. This study attempted to give voice to the “why” and “how” surrounding body image. Using this newly identified voice, it is hoped that new practices and policies will be identified.

Academic and co-curricular units

Understanding body image and its influence on young women’s decisions is a worthy endeavor that carries implications for both academic and co-curricular units in higher education. My research supports the need to establish persistent outreach to students. Academic and co-curricular units may wish to sponsor and/or initiate events that encourage students to consider and discuss issues surrounding body image. My experience gained through interviewing the study participants would indicate that young women are ready and willing to discuss body image and its potential impact on their lives. Academic and co-curricular units should consider co-sponsoring outreach efforts and events with departments on campus (e.g., athletics and women’s studies).

My research also suggests the need to educate students to be more critical consumers of the media. American women are constantly confronted with traditional concepts of beauty and stereotypes regarding physical appearance (Miles, 2009). Knowing that women often tie their self-worth to their physical appearance, advertising campaigns capitalize physical

appearance. A woman's body has become a marketing tool for products aimed at both men and women.

Research has suggested that the standards of beauty and attractiveness set forth by the media may contribute to a woman's satisfaction or dissatisfaction with her body (Swami & Smith, 2012). Miles (2009) found that "viewing images of the thin-ideal caused an increase in body dissatisfaction, negative mood states, and eating disorder symptoms" (p. 5). Viewing these images also led to decreased self-esteem (Miles). Steinfeldt, Carter, Zakrajsek, and Steinfeldt (2011) agreed, stating that the results of their study of 143 women at a small private college in the Midwest suggested that "the more a woman desires to be thin, the lower levels of body esteem she reports" (p. 412). Based upon these findings, understanding media manipulation would appear to decrease the likelihood that women would view media images as ideal and attainable.

Participation in sports or physical activity was found to positively influence the body image of my participants. This was also supported in literature (Greenleaf et al., 2009; Richman & Shaffer, 2000; Smith et al., 2007); therefore, college workout facilities and wellness centers should be purposefully designed and managed in order to provide a safe and encouraging environment for all who choose to participate.

University counseling centers

The literature is in agreement that body-image dissatisfaction, which is prevalent among women, must be addressed; however, there is far less agreement regarding the effectiveness of intervention strategies. While my research did not focus on counseling interventions, I believe it would be negligent to fail to discuss the need for counseling centers

to address body-image dissatisfaction. Researchers have studied an array of interventions resulting in mixed findings. One such study conducted by Richardson and Paxton (2009), emphasized that program content and methodology are not the only important intervention components; setting, participants, and style and mode of presentation also need to be considered. The most common and highly recommended body image intervention strategy discussed in literature is group therapy (Duba et al., 2010; Steese et al., 2006; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005).

Group therapy refers to any type of therapy or support that involves treating more than one client in a group setting (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Groups focused on treating women with dissatisfied body image tend to integrate relational theory, resiliency practices, social support, and skills training in order to enhance positive connections with self and others, collective strength, and competence (Steese et al., 2006). The use of gender-specific groups also increases perceived social support, self-efficacy, and body image improvement (Steese et al., 2006). Duba et al. (2010) proposed the use of narrative therapy groups for women dissatisfied with their body image. The findings in my research supported this idea. The participants reported a strong influence of peers on their body image. Positive interactions with female peers resulted in positive feelings of body image.

In another study, Choate (2005) recommended a model for treating body-image issues that focus on enhancing protective factors as a means for prevention and intervention. Choate's study identified a model that suggested the use of the following: family-of-origin support; gender role satisfaction; positive physical self-concept; effective coping strategies; and a sense of holistic balance and wellness. When using this model, women are encouraged to focus less on weight, shape, and physical appearance and encouraged to refocus on

spirituality, self-direction, work and leisure, friendship, and love as a means for finding purpose in life (Choate). The themes that emerged during my research would support this approach to counseling.

Despite disparate findings in studies of body image intervention strategies for young women, researchers agree that any type of intervention is better than no intervention. My research would indicate that focusing on media education and a young woman's relationships with female relatives and peers would be most beneficial.

K-12 education

Findings in my study regarding the relationship between body image and individuals with disabilities may suggest implications for the K-12 educational system. My research indicated a positive connection between satisfied body image and consistent exposure, at a young age, to individuals with disabilities. These findings appear to support the integration of individuals with disabilities in the K-12 classroom.

Additionally, all three participants appeared to have a high degree of media literacy regarding doctored imaging and unrealistic expectations. This seems to support media literacy education during formative years, especially puberty. Hope, who indicated that her high school provided education regarding issues surrounding body image, reported a strong, positive body image. She credited the education she received through media education classes for much of her confidence regarding body comparison. A variety of approaches to media education or intervention was discussed previously in the section reviewing media influence. In summary, researchers have suggested that young women should be educated about the measures advertisers take to alter images (Levine & Piron 2004). These findings

suggest that early media education may be an important component of improving female body image.

Finally, participation in athletics or regular physical activity appeared to promote healthy body image in my participants. This would suggest a continued push for physical education during a student's K-12 education. An emphasis on sports or activities, which can be continued past the K-12 years, appears to be indicated, as does an emphasis on activities that can be performed outside the physical education classroom. Additionally, research indicates the environment surrounding participation in athletics plays a crucial role in self-image development; therefore, athletic programs should be carefully and purposefully developed to ensure that coaches and parents are educated to create an environment that promotes fun and competence (Greenleaf, Boyer & Petrie, 2009).

Recommendations for Future Research

Based upon the literature, it is clear that body image and self-image impact college-age women, and that body image is influenced by both the media and their interactions with others. While some research has been conducted to assess the effect of body image on educational success, further study is needed to explore this area more thoroughly.

This study attempted to address gaps in the literature related to the phenomenon of body image as experienced by the group most likely to be negatively influenced—white, middleclass, college-age women. While quantitative data were available regarding the negative influence of body image on this demographic, this qualitative study attempted to give voice to the “how” and “why” body image impacts this demographic so severely. This study was limited in scope to a single institution and to three participants who each reported a

satisfied body image. It would be interesting to expand the study to include additional institutions and a larger participant pool. It might be beneficial to conduct a similar study with young women of color or women reporting a dissatisfied body image. A comparison of their experiences would add greatly to our understanding of how young women make meaning of body image in the college environment.

A qualitative study of student athletes could enhance our understanding of the implications of participation in athletics on body image. The literature has revealed both positive and negative influence of athletics on body image. A qualitative approach to this research may help distinguish the nuances that lead to either a negative or, conversely, a positive body image.

This research study relied upon the use of semi-structured interviews to capture how women make meaning of body image. The use of additional data-collection methods could lead to additional discoveries. Focus groups would enable a more free-flowing conversation than one-on-one interviews. These conversations could raise unexpected issues for exploration. Additionally, the use of photovoice, also known as participatory photography, could provide a unique lens through which to view the issue of body image (Wang & Burris, 1994). In photovoice research, participants are asked to represent their experience or point of view by taking photographs, developing narratives to accompany their photos, and discussing them. Photovoice is intended to give insight into how individuals conceptualize their circumstances (Wang & Burris). The use of these additional methods could provide additional insight into the lived experiences of young women as they make meaning of body image.

Finally, there is a paucity of related literature available addressing the implication of having a close friend or family member with a disability and its impact on body-image satisfaction. Since the participants in my study all reported and demonstrated satisfied body image, it would be interesting to determine if those findings remain constant across a larger sample size. I believe that it would also be worthwhile to repeat the current study with a researcher who is closer, in age and body size, to the participant pool.

I concur with Devaraj and Lewis (2010) who noted that “research into body image improvement programs is in its infancy and more research is needed that targets aspects that are important in the development and maintenance of body-image dissatisfaction such as negative affect and dieting behaviors” (p. 105). Young women are faced increasingly with pressure to conform to society’s ideal of the perfect body. This pressure originates with the media, and spreads to peers and society in general. The literature has revealed that this prevalent negative body image in young women leads to negative consequences in their health and academic success. Body image improvement programs at an early age may be the answer to this disturbing trend.

Reflexivity

I discussed my positionality as a researcher in Chapter 3. As I completed my research, I discovered that my positionality played a large role in my interpretation and analysis of the data. I also believe that my presence as a researcher may have impacted the responses of the participants. As the primary investigator, I was also the primary instrument for data collection and data analysis. My principal responsibilities were to develop relationships and gain the trust of the research participants, to behave in an ethical manner at

all times, and to carefully analyze my findings to ensure that my positionality did not influence the results.

As I interacted with the participants, I found myself reflecting on my role as the researcher and the influence my weight might have played in their responses. I was approximately 60 pounds overweight at the time of the interviews. The reality that my appearance might influence their statements regarding size was an ever-present thought during the interview and data-analysis stages of the research. I would be interested in repeating the study with a researcher who was closer to normal weight.

The goal of this study was to investigate the relationships young women have with their bodies. I am almost ashamed to admit that, during participant recruitment and data gathering, I was hoping one of the participants would have dissatisfied body image, despite the negative effects I knew would accompany this dissatisfaction. As a feminist researcher, I was conflicted by this desire. I wanted to present an interesting and meaningful study, but I also desired for the young women to have happy and healthy lives, both mentally and physically. I found myself journaling about this and frequently discussing this conflict with my peer reviewers.

I was surprised and delighted to discover that each of my participants had satisfied body image and had experienced meaningful relationships with individuals with disabilities. As indicated in my positionality statement, I considered myself to have a satisfied body image; and I also had a meaningful relationship with individuals with disabilities during my formative years. I even chose to work in the field of vocational rehabilitation counseling, and was employed in this field for 18 years, although I moved on to work in higher education 8 years ago. This finding holds a great deal of promise and will, most likely, become the

focus of my future research. During the process of this research, I constructed a map of the current literature on body image (Appendix D) that should prove useful in future endeavors.

I was honored to work with Grace, Isabelle, and Hope. These remarkable young women defied convention by presenting positive body image; and, because of this, I was able to learn a great deal. They shattered any preconceived ideas I had about their age group. I am pleased that they will be influencing the next generation of young women as teachers.

APPENDIX A. HUMAN SUBJECTS APPROVAL

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Institutional Review Board
Office of Responsible Research
Vice President for Research
1138 Pearson Hall
Ames, Iowa 50011-2207
515 294-4566
FAX 515 294-4267

Date: 8/21/2012

To: Debra Sanborn
1080 Hixson-Lied Student Success Center

CC: Dr. Larry Ebbers
N256 Lagomarcino

From: Office for Responsible Research

Title: How College Women Make Meaning of Body Image in the College Environment

IRB ID: 12-394

Approval Date: 8/21/2012

Date for Continuing Review: 8/20/2014

Submission Type: New

Review Type: Expedited

The project referenced above has received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Iowa State University according to the dates shown above. Please refer to the IRB ID number shown above in all correspondence regarding this study.

To ensure compliance with federal regulations (45 CFR 46 & 21 CFR 56), please be sure to:

- **Use only the approved study materials** in your research, **including the recruitment materials and informed consent documents that have the IRB approval stamp.**
- **Retain signed informed consent documents for 3 years after the close of the study**, when documented consent is required.
- **Obtain IRB approval prior to implementing any changes to the study** by submitting a Modification Form for Non-Exempt Research or Amendment for Personnel Changes form, as necessary.
- **Immediately inform the IRB of (1) all serious and/or unexpected adverse experiences** involving risks to subjects or others; and (2) **any other unanticipated problems involving risks** to subjects or others.
- **Stop all research activity if IRB approval lapses**, unless continuation is necessary to prevent harm to research participants. Research activity can resume once IRB approval is reestablished.
- **Complete a new continuing review form** at least three to four weeks prior to the **date for continuing review** as noted above to provide sufficient time for the IRB to review and approve continuation of the study. We will send a courtesy reminder as this date approaches.

Please be aware that IRB approval means that you have met the requirements of federal regulations and ISU policies governing human subjects research. **Approval from other entities may also be needed.** For example, access to data from private records (e.g. student, medical, or employment records, etc.) that are protected by FERPA, HIPAA, or other confidentiality policies requires permission from the holders of those records. Similarly, for research conducted in institutions other than ISU (e.g., schools, other colleges or universities, medical facilities, companies, etc.), investigators must obtain permission from the institution(s) as required by their policies. **IRB approval in no way implies or guarantees that permission from these other entities will be granted.**

Upon completion of the project, please submit a Project Closure Form to the Office for Responsible Research, 1138 Pearson Hall, to officially close the project.

Please don't hesitate to contact us if you have questions or concerns at 515-294-4566 or IRB@iastate.edu.

APPENDIX B. PARTICIPANT COMMUNICATION

B-1. EMAIL AND PHONE SCRIPT

Email Script

Study Title: How women make meaning of body image in the college environment

Dear ____,

My name is Chrystal Stanley. I am a graduate student in the School of Education, at Iowa State University. I am conducting a research study as part of the requirements of my degree, and I would like to invite you to participate.

I am studying how women make meaning of body image in the college environment. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to take part in multiple (2-3) semi-structured interviews about your impressions on this topic. In particular, you will be asked questions related to the following guiding questions.

1. How do college women come to understand body image?
2. How do college women make meaning of their own body image in the college environment?

The interviews will take place at a mutually agreed upon time and place, and should last about 60-90 minutes. The interviews will be audio taped so that I can accurately reflect on what is discussed. The tapes will only be reviewed by members of the research team who will transcribe and analyze them. They will then be destroyed. Participation is confidential. Study information will be kept in a secure location. The results of the study may be published or presented at professional meetings, but your identity will not be revealed.

You will not have any costs from participating in this study. You will receive a \$20 iTunes gift card after the final interview as a way to thank you for your time.

Taking part in the study is your decision. You may decide to end your participation or not to answer any question you are not comfortable answering.

I will be happy to answer any questions you have about the study. You may contact me at 515-779-9113 or cstanley@iastate.edu if you have study related questions or problems. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at Iowa State University at 515-294-4566 or IRB@iastate.edu.

Thank you for your consideration. If you would like to participate, please respond to this email. I will also contact you within the next week to see whether you are willing to participate.

Sincerely,

Phone Script

Hello, my name is Chrystal Stanley. I am a graduate student in the School of Education, at Iowa State University. I am conducting a research study as part of the requirements of my degree, and I would like to invite you to participate. (Wait for response.)

I am studying how women make meaning of body image in the college environment. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to take part in multiple (2 or 3) interviews about your impressions on this topic. In particular, you will be asked questions related to the following guiding questions.

1. How do college women come to understand body image?
2. How do college women make meaning of their own body image in the college environment?

Does this sound of interest to you? (Wait for response.)

I would like to tell you more about how you will be involved. The interviews will take place at a mutually agreed upon time and place, and should last about 60-90 minutes. The interviews will be audio taped so that I can accurately reflect on what is discussed. The tapes will only be reviewed by members of the research team who will transcribe and analyze them. They will then be destroyed. Participation is confidential. Study information will be kept in a secure location. The results of the study may be published or presented at professional meetings, but your identity will not be revealed.

You will not have any costs from participating in this study. You will receive a \$20 iTunes gift card after the final interview as a way to thank you for your time

Taking part in the study is your decision. You may decide to end your participation or not to answer any question you are not comfortable answering. Would you be interested in participating in this study? Would you like more information or more time to consider your decision? (Wait for response.)

I will be happy to answer any questions you have about the study. You may contact me at 515-779-9113 or cstanley@iastate.edu if you have study related questions or problems. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at Iowa State University at 515-294-4566 or IRB@iastate.edu.

(If they agree to participate, thank them and set a time to meet.)

(If they would like more time to consider the research, state the following.) Thank you for your consideration. I will contact you again within the next week to see whether you are willing to participate.

(If they decline, thank them for their time and hang up.)

B-2. SCREENING SURVEY

Thank you for your interest in participating in my research. The purpose of this study is to explore how young women make meaning of their body image in the college environment. This study will also strive to understand the role of protective factors in the formation of young women's body image.

Please complete the following survey in order to determine your appropriateness for the study.

Name: _____

Email: _____

Phone: _____

Race (Please select all that apply.)

- ☐ Black or African American
- ☐ American Indian/Alaskan Native
- ☐ Asian
- ☐ Hispanic or Latino of Any Race
- ☐ Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander
- ☐ Two or More Races
- ☐ White
- ☐ International

Age

- ☐ Younger than 18 years of age
- ☐ 18-25 years of age
- ☐ Over 25 years of age

Year in school:

- ☐ Freshman
- ☐ Sophomore
- ☐ Junior
- ☐ Senior

Number of years at Iowa State University:

- ☐ This is my first year
- ☐ I have completed 1 year at ISU
- ☐ I have completed 1 and ½ years at ISU
- ☐ I have completed 2 years at ISU
- ☐ I have completed 2 and ½ years at ISU
- ☐ I have completed 3 or more years at ISU

Major: _____

Hometown: _____

Height: _____

Weight: _____

Thank you for your participation in this screening survey. You will be contacted within the week regarding your selection status.

For further information about the study contact: Chrystal Stanley (Primary Investigator) at 515-779-9113 or Larry Ebbers (Major Professor) at 515- 294-8067.

Records identifying participants will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by applicable laws and regulations and will not be made publicly available. However, federal government agencies, auditing departments of Iowa State University, and the Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves human subjects research studies) may inspect and/or copy your records for quality assurance and data analysis. These records may contain private information.

To ensure confidentiality to the extent permitted by law, the following measures will be taken. You will be assigned a code name that will be used on forms instead of your name. Records will be kept in a locked cabinet and computer files will be password protected. Only the research team will have access. If results are published, your identity will remain confidential.

B-3. INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Title of Study: How women make meaning of body image in the college environment

Investigator: Chrystal Stanley

This is a research study. Please take your time in deciding if you would like to participate. Please feel free to ask questions at any time.

INTRODUCTION:

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore how young women make meaning of their body image in the college environment. This study will also strive to understand the role of protective factors in the formation of young women's body image.

DESCRIPTION OF PROCEDURES:

If you agree to participate in this study, your participation will last through multiple interviews lasting 60-90 minutes each. During the study you may expect the following study procedures to be followed: Data will be gathered using multiple, 60-90 minute semi structured interviews. The interviews will occur at a time and location that is comfortable and convenient for you. The interview will include personal questions related to your background and relationships as well as your body image. The interview will be audio taped. The audiotape will be transcribed verbatim and reviewed by the researcher. You will be asked, from time to time, to review transcripts of your interview and/or writing by the researcher that results from your interviews.

RISKS:

There is the potential for psychological distress related to discussing body image; however, you will be provided with information regarding appropriate support should interviews prove to be upsetting.

BENEFITS:

If you decide to participate in this study there will be no direct benefit to you. It is hoped that the information gained in this study will benefit the researcher by providing valuable information about body image and resource strategies for young adult women enrolled in higher education.

COSTS AND COMPENSATION:

You will not accrue any costs by participating in this study. You will receive a \$20 iTunes gift card after the final interview as a way to thank you for your time. If you end your participation prior to the final interview, a gift card will still be provided to you.

PARTICIPANT RIGHTS:

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or leave the study at any time. If you decide not to participate in the study or leave the study early, it will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

CONFIDENTIALITY:

Records identifying participants will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by applicable laws and regulations and will not be made publicly available. However, federal government agencies, auditing departments of Iowa State University, and the Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves human subjects research studies) may inspect and/or copy your records for quality assurance and data analysis. These records may contain private information.

To ensure confidentiality to the extent permitted by law, the following measures will be taken. You will be assigned a code name that will be used on forms instead of your name. Records will be kept in a locked cabinet and computer files will be password protected. Only the research team will have access. If results are published, your identity will remain confidential. Audio tapes of interviews will be destroyed upon completion of the study.

QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS:

You are encouraged to ask questions at any time during this study.

- For further information about the study contact: Chrystal Stanley (Primary Investigator) at 515-779-9113 or Larry Ebbers (Major Professor) at 515- 294-8067.
- If you have any questions about the rights of research subjects or research-related injury, please contact the IRB Administrator, 515-294-4566, IRB@iastate.edu, or Director, 515-294-3115, Office for Responsible Research, Iowa State University, Ames, IA 50011.

PARTICIPANT SIGNATURE:

Your signature indicates that you voluntarily agree to participate in this study, that the study has been explained to you, that you have been given the time to read the document and that your questions have been satisfactorily answered. You will receive a copy of the written informed consent prior to your participation in the study.

Participant's Name: (printed)_____

Participant's Signature_____

Date_____

INVESTIGATOR STATEMENT

I certify that the participant has been given adequate time to read and learn about the study and all of their questions have been answered. It is my opinion that the participant understands the purpose, risks, benefits and the procedures that will be followed in this study and has voluntarily agreed to participate.

Signature of Person Obtaining Informed Consent_____

Date_____

B-4. INTERVIEW GUIDES

Background and Relationships

Please tell me a little about your background such as how, where and with whom you grew up.

Tell me about your relationships with your family members.

Tell me about your friends.

Tell me about your most recent romantic relationship and how you feel about that person.

When you meet new people, what attracts you to them?

Self-Perception

What kinds of things do you do to manage your appearance?

(Probes, diet, exercise, make-up, tan, hair, etc.)

When I mention “body image”, what is the first thing that comes to your mind? Why?

Overall, are you satisfied with your appearance? Why or why not?

What do you think is most attractive about yourself? Why?

What do you like about your appearance? Why? How does this make you feel?

Is there anything you dislike about your appearance? Why? How does this make you feel? Do you try to change this, and if so, how?

Do you ever use clothes to emphasize your body? Explain.

Do you ever use clothes to conceal your body? Explain.

Do you feel pressured to be skinny?

How would you describe how you feel about your body?

Has that changed over time or remained fairly constant?

How do you believe your background and relationships have impacted how you feel about your body?

Effect of Media

What media do you watch, listen to and/or read?

Do you ever compare your appearance to that of women portrayed in the media? Explain.

Does the media affect your view on your body? How?

I am now going to show you images of women in today’s media.

Which women do you feel has the ideal body? Why?

Are any of these images similar to your appearance?

Are any of these images similar to how you would like to look?

Do you believe it is possible for you to achieve that appearance?

Which of the images is least similar to how you would like to look? Why?

Effect of Others

Do you ever feel insecure about your body when talking to people you consider to be attractive?

Would you ever surgically change a part of your body to match a friend/celebrity because you thought it looked attractive on them?

Does how you feel about your body ever influence the decision you make?

Is there anything else that you would like to discuss or go back to?

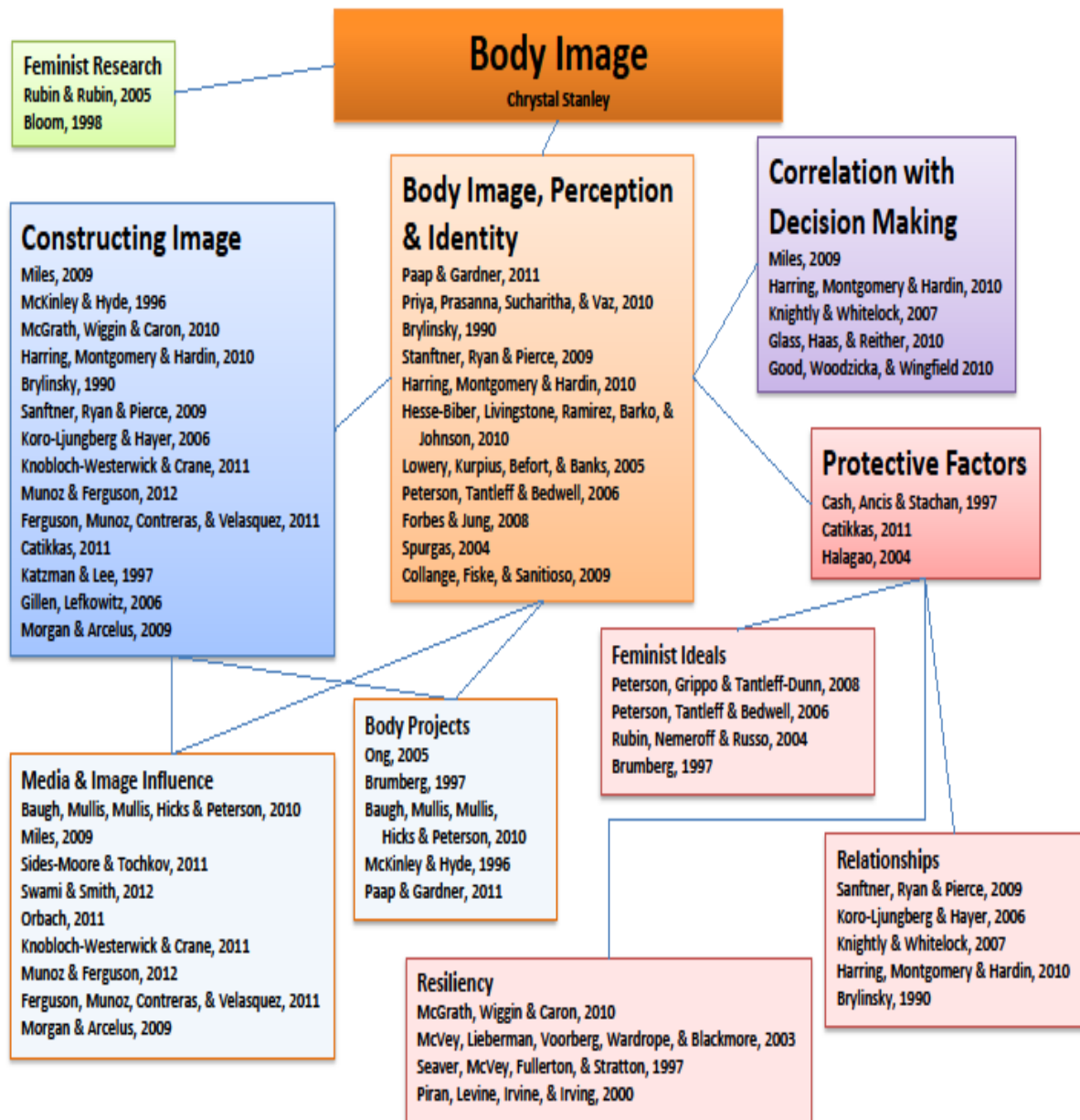
APPENDIX C. CELEBRITY COMPARISON EXERCISE







APPENDIX D. BODY IMAGE LITERATURE MAP



REFERENCES

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